Vagabond City

By Winifred Boggs

30-F #3

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"Here we have no abiding city."

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press
1911

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WINIFRED BOGGS

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

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Vagabond City

CHAPTER I

HOW MATRIMONY WAS NOT A JOKE

TO the million, merely a "honeymoon couple," obviously ill at ease, possibly embarrassed; to the one in a million, something more than a pair ill-matched,—something like tragedy stalking hard on their heels. The bridegroom: a man in a trap with desperate eyes, and primitive jesting mouth. The bride: just a woman in her "best clothes."

They had been married in November, had endured a three-days' honeymoon in a London fog, and were now setting forth in the midst of a hopeless drizzle for a country cottage in the wilds of the New Forest.

She had married because otherwise she would become an old maid. She had taken Michael Talbot, because he represented her only chance. He had married because he could not get out of it.

In a small way Talbot was a celebrity. He it was, who, under the title of "The Vagabond," wrote humorous paragraphs in the newspapers, and contributed a weekly series on his experiences in three continents to a famous journal; but he

had not justified his craft in the bride's eyes, for though money in plenty must have come to him from time to time, nothing of it remained. He had spent all he made wandering for ten years outside the pale of civilisation. She felt that the taint of savagery still clung to him, and feared it.

Talbot had not wanted to marry. Least of all had he wanted to marry Muriel Dalton. The price was too heavy for a ten-years-old and nearly cold calf-love. He had been twenty-one, she eighteen; there had been moonlight, shaded conservatories, a band in the distance wailing sentimental valses; there had been all the settings, everything—except the love itself.

He had drifted into a "private understanding," forgotten it, and returned to meet it,—in the guise of a recognised engagement,—only a few weeks back. And now he was married! After ten years, a boy's careless love-making had risen disastrously against him.

"*You and I together, love, never mind the weather, love!*" he muttered ironically to himself, as he gazed out of the rain-dashed windows. He had never even known weather could be abominable till he set forth on his wedding-journey with his three-days' wife.

"I don't believe I shall be able to work in the Forest, after all," he said aloud.

"There will be bills even there," said Muriel, tightening her rather thin lips. "Has n't uncle been good about the cottage?"

"I will reserve my opinion till I 've seen it," returned Mick. "After all it won't let, and he 'd never dream of using it."

"It will mean living for next to nothing, and saving . . . "

"I hate saving," growled the Vagabond. "I don't know how you start."

"You must start now you are married, dear," said his wife firmly. "You are no longer an irresponsible bachelor."

"No—worse luck!" muttered the newly-made husband ungraciously to himself. "I 'm done for. Trapped. In the gin for *life*—good God!"

"Rose Cottage sounds delightful——"

"There are no roses in November," he reminded her—rather brutally.

A dreary country cottage, isolation, respectability—and Muriel! He turned heart-sick at the thought.

While the ungrateful recipient of the rich uncle's gift grumbled at the cottage, the generous owner sat close to a cozy fire, a large plate of perfectly toasted muffins by his side, pluming himself upon the generosity which had cost him nothing. As a very excellent business man, Uncle William preferred that sort of generosity. He never thought of himself as Mr. Higgins, or even William (Billie in his youth); such a name for such a great man seemed entirely inadequate,—almost indecent. He saw himself always as the god in the car, the Mayor, a power in the land.

He was the Rich Uncle, a Providence—scarcely a minor one. His very figure, carried well to the fore, spoke for him. Under no circumstances could he be thought of as other men.

Yet he had a heart, for on winter evenings, after the large plate of muffins had disappeared, he was apt to become sentimental, and would think of the lady he remembered as his first love,—and of young lovers in general,—with moisture in his eyes.

It is merely a physiological fact and not cheap cynicism, that Uncle William only reached to a high altitude of sentiment after a big meal.

He had been fortunate enough to bury his first love and to marry for common-sense; thus, so to speak, killing two birds with one stone. To him it was nothing that he had loved, but much that he had lost. It placed him on a high and superior basis. He was a man with a secret sorrow, albeit one bravely borne as all his intimates could testify.

"May they be long spared to each other," he muttered piously, thinking of the fortunate lovers hurrying off to his country cottage. "Some of us have only our memories . . . " His voice trailed piteously.

His wife, while despised by him as the inferior article, yet understood him perfectly, looked gravely into the fire, and sighed in chorus. The gods had been merciful in endowing her with a sense of humour, carefully hidden, so that William

Higgins could be an amusement, as well as an annoyance. Yet of the two, she had the only right to a memory; since to her it was a pain and not a pleasure.

After dinner, Mr. Higgins became still more sentimental. He pictured the honeymooners sitting hand in hand by their lent hearth and blessing him in their prayers. He was a pious man and believed in being mentioned in people's prayers. He had risen to his present eminence by persistent pushing of himself and by getting goods at as low a price as possible. That he should be extolled in High Quarters was only right and fitting, and possibly beneficial.

"I hope the cottage won't be damp," said his wife thoughtfully.

He waved her into silence. Had n't a "bug-hunter" and his wife once found it a six weeks' Paradise! Was n't it within reach of God's Hill? A name like that . . . !

"One can be a little *too* prosaic, Jane," was his gentle reproof.

Jane, however, reminded him, just the same, that that six weeks had been ideal summer weather, while the honeymooners were starting a long tenancy in a very wet November. "It makes a difference," she concluded.

"Not when one loves. . . ." The reproof was still gentle, as befitted a man of sad memories.

"Will that keep the rain out?"

"They are very fortunate," insisted Uncle

William loudly—his idea of arguing was to shout down other people—"I wish *I* had had someone to act fairy godmother when *I* was young."

Mrs. Higgins looked gravely at the ponderous figure, the stretched waistcoat, of the fairy godmother.

"A furnished cottage," he went on, "at the top of a hill, commanding a lovely view, close to wide stretches of moors, everything, save actual food, found—which if they are genuinely in love ought to be a mere nothing."

Even in the days of his first love, Uncle William's own keep had been far from a mere nothing, and the sensible wife stitched a covert smile into her rather hideous fancy work.

"No Man's Land," said Jane, and gave a little shiver. "It sounds dreary, somehow, at this time of the year."

Mr. Higgins frowned.

"It 's just the place," he went on positively, "for his nature studies, and he will have time to write one of that sort of novels that make money, —I don't mean an indecent one," he added quickly. He was seldom humorous—consciously. "People were n't" when they had "got on in the world." They preferred a higher, more dignified, attitude. "He wants stirring up. It 's a good thing Muriel will stand no nonsense. I made a point of speaking to him after the ceremony, yet his attitude was not what I could have wished. It was almost free and easy."

"Surely not to *you*, William!"

"I may be mistaken. I trust I am. I spoke about the need of hard work, too, the privilege of providing for a wife and family—he left me in the middle to speak to a most Bohemian-looking person. Still, Muriel will be firm. He is blessed with a sensible wife—like myself." He smiled condescendingly upon the partner of his joys, even patted her hand. There was, he flattered himself, "no nonsense" about *his* wife.

"He 'll have to work hard, too," he continued. "If a man is provided with too many creature comforts, he becomes lazy and won't work, and over-feeding is stultifying to the brain." He unbuttoned the last few buttons of his waistcoat as he spoke.

The sensible wife said nothing—but she stitched in another smile.

The rich uncle had had three helpings of his favourite pudding. Still, perhaps he had the big heart he made such an asset of, as well as a big appetite, under the ex-mayoral waistcoat.

"They 've been engaged ten years, and he 's been away most of the time," said Mrs. Higgins, a little later. "That kind of marriage is a risk. He 's been growing fast away from her while she 's been standing still. That sort of thing makes difficulties, William. Muriel won't develop —there 's nothing in her to grow; there 's only a tiny brain and soul in that fine body of hers. Besides, she would have ignored the arrangement

as a childish thing of no consequence, if a better chance had turned up."

"Well—that 's business," was the reply of the man whose sentiment lay in streaks. "I 'm sure we did our best to get her well-settled; but somehow in spite of her looks she did n't go off. It puzzled me."

"She had looks and yet she was almost extraordinarily devoid of attraction. To know her was a disappointment; the more you knew of her the greater the disappointment."

"Still they must have loved each other all the time and kept faithful," Uncle William remarked briskly, letting sentiment override business for the moment. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder, you know."

He spoke as if he alone had invented the great truism. As a platitudinist Mr. Higgins was almost great.

"One often wonders of *whom*," returned Mrs. Higgins with sudden cynicism. "And what do you mean by *faithful*, William?" The bridegroom's face in all its fierce virility rose before her. She had seen Michael Talbot attractive beyond the usual run, but she had seen him also rather appalling.

"That they loved no one else of course," he returned. "You are rather dense to-night, Jane. They are a lucky pair! And Mrs. Hobbs living close, ready to look after their comforts, a divine cook——"

"When she is sober——"

"Don't carp, Jane! Besides she 's taken the pledge——"

"They always do—when they can't control themselves," retorted Jane, beginning to fold up her work. "It throws the onus on Other Shoulders. It 's the last and most fatal stage of a drunkard's career—an open confession of failure. It 's ten o'clock."

"Then ring for prayers."

Prayers—as if coffee or a fried steak hot—were rung for. The servants trooped in, resigned expressions on their faces, and the ex-mayor extended the voice of patronage to his Maker. Though kind and courteous about it, he was singularly firm. He stated one or two wishes—we will not say commands—rather definitely. He liked things—even his religion—run on business lines.

Besides, he was over-lord of many work-people, to whom he said, come, and they came; go, and they went. And he had shaken hands with a royal duke—with a friendliness that rather astonished that personage. He had also attended a dinner which had for its chief attraction a famous ambassador and his friends, and he was certainly the chief personage of his own particular suburb, so that at no time could he be classed with the rest of the world. He had been three times mayor of Little-Dale and was the admired rich uncle of parasitic nephews and nieces.

If he had guessed that the bridegroom was not blessing him on the wedding-journey, he would have been immensely surprised, as well as grieved, at the ingratitude of man. Mentally, he saw Michael Talbot speaking of his benefactor with deep gratitude and he guessed nothing of a savage face staring out of a train window.

Michael's numerous friends would not have recognised their merry vagabond—the man who would seldom be serious, who helped to make the long days pass swiftly, whose facile pen, while it made many laugh, made others wonder how any grown man could write such nonsense. Yet Lewis Carroll wrote nonsense, once upon a time, and Hans Andersen.

In his ten years of wandering, he had been in more than one tight place; stood, so to speak, with his back to the wall—and stood there with careless insouciance. But now, though he was in the tightest place of all, he saw no way out. He cowered with courage down, laughter very far from his lips.

As he sat there, grim and forbidding, the type of the man was only too plain. It was the type that never goes through life easily. He would be almost inevitably the square peg in the round hole. He would travel a rough road with a jest—but his feet would ache none the less for it. Vagabond was written all over him; his path was meant by nature to be the pathway of the pioneer; he was of those who here have no abiding city. The curse

of the wandering Jew is on him, and he must ever seek that which lies beyond; but his curse—ironically—he calls Freedom. When age and weariness cry halt, the roaming spirit still wields the bloody spur. At home, bright faces by a red fire; for him no hearth-fire at all.

What of the night, then, wanderer, what of the night?

He follows the lone trail to the end, not because he would, but because he must, and the bitter blood of Ishmael will not let him rest.

A question mocks him: "What went ye into the wilderness to see?—A reed shaken by the wind?" and he can give no answer. The thing lies deeper than words, and is stronger than all the reason in the world. His interests, those he loves, bid him stay and gather goodly moss—but the gods have shod his feet with the wander-fire. And so he follows his destiny, and the desert winds scatter his dust. In youth, the fluttering of great white wings, the ship all white and rose; in age, dark vulture-wings and a ship with sails of "black and tarnished gold." And another vagabond "gone under." Of Michael Talbot and his like, it is truly written—"their breath is agitation and their life a storm."

He had an odd, an arresting face, and the spirit of the incarnate gipsy looked out of it. It was dark and virile and contradictory. The jaw was harsh, selfish, domineering; the mouth wholly reckless, a little coarse, the corners by turn ironical

and whimsical. Idealism lay in the fine forehead, and the sweeping brows and the eyes. The eyes were magnificent, deep and dark and grey, full of the wildness, the fire, and the inner vision of the Celt. The eyes of a dreamer—and the eyes of greatness.

Yet Mick Talbot had done little in the world as yet, had made no lasting mark.

He walked with the careless swing of one who has long lived close to nature, and there was something incongruous in the idea of his starting on a conventional honeymoon—though perhaps it was Muriel who struck the note of incongruity, representing, as she did, all the little gods of respectable civilisation. Her upbringing made her position as Michael Talbot's wife little short of ridiculous. It was a case of Mrs. Grundy hand in hand with one of the out-classed.

She came of a father and grandfather, narrow clergymen in narrow parishes, women-ridden, and because she was not quite a lady, was painfully afraid of anything "common" or lacking in refinement. It was "common" to have the great grandparents she had had on both sides, so — rather cleverly — she ignored them.

Her mother divided people she called on "socially," and people she called on as vicar's wife, into sheep and goats, and found an allegory in Scripture, between two peoples whence a great gulf was set. It would have been impossible for

her to forget the gulf—and Muriel was her mother's daughter.

The rich William Higgins, who, in his mayoral capacity, mixed with the great ones of the earth, was the real god to whom the vicar's wife made burnt offerings. He had no children; she, the usual clerical family. Could anything be more providential? Her eight children were brought up to fear and propitiate God, but to worship Uncle William. Uncle William was the bird in the hand. It was hoped he might have many and immediate benefits to bestow.

As a matter of fact the country cottage had been the only one—Mr. Higgins was in no sense of the word a waster;—it was regarded as a good omen, and accepted with effusive gratitude.

Mrs. Dalton had pronounced "country cottage" in such a fashion that many people supposed it a shooting-box, and perhaps Mr. Higgins had his excuse for thinking it rather magnificent himself.

"It is well situated on the top of a hill," the owner—who had never seen it—informed the newly-married couple, "and commands a fine view. You will be charmed . . . charmed. . . ."

Muriel was sure of that and it was too generous of him for words! He spoiled them *so* dreadfully!

Uncle William blew himself out and said, "Not at all." It was just the place for a writer who was confessedly short of cash—like most writers he supposed—ha! ha! The bridegroom would have no distraction to take him from his

work—it did not occur to the speaker to consider Muriel in the light of a distraction—he could amass a comfortable sum and then settle down in a correct villa in a correct suburb.

The bridegroom merely looked dazed.

"It will be all incomings and practically no outgoings," continued the philanthropist, "and that, my dear boy, is the secret of fortune,—the corner-stone"—everybody applauded the grandiloquent sentiment—"and love's young dream and silvern glades." The last human touch further endeared the speaker to his admiring relatives. Now a thought of Mr. Higgins and the silvern glades brought an ironical twist to Mick's lip as he stared at the hopeless outlook.

"Will it *never* stop raining!" wondered the bride.

Michael said nothing. What did it matter whether the rain stopped or not when one was married? Nothing was ever going to matter very much again. Freedom lay drooping with a broken wing; the old days were done.

He glanced at his wife, then turned away with a frown. He was conscious of something wrong with her clothes, of something that jarred his sense of the fit.

It was pouring hopelessly; their destination was a desolate cottage in the forest miles away from a station; they would almost certainly have to take the journey in an open trap, and Muriel wore an elaborate over-trimmed pale blue coat

and skirt, had on thin shoes with very high heels, and a picture hat smothered in pale blue feathers.

The type—and class—of woman he knew most about would have worn a short-skirted tweed costume and well-cut raincoat with appropriate boots and headgear, but Muriel, as he was to discover, would insist upon being—parochially—smart, irrespective of suitability.

"It 's dreadful to take one 's wedding-journey in such weather!" lamented the bride. "Oh, Mick, why can't you say something—something cheerful!"

But he only said, rather tactlessly, that he did n't see that it made it any worse.

"You forget . . . 'Happy is the bride that the sun shines on,' and it 's poured since the minute we were married, for three days . . . it seems so unlucky." She shivered, partly with cold, partly with superstition.

"Yes, it 's unlucky," he agreed, absently thinking of the marriage rather than the rain. "Devilish unlucky!"

Muriel was silent for a while, then she said nervously, "Does n't it seem odd that we are really married; that we are going to spend all our lives together?"

Mick pressed his face against the blurred window in a spirit of passionate revolt, and the train went round to "all our lives together—all our lives together!" repeated incessantly. He felt he

should go mad, but all he said, in rather a strained voice, was, "Yes, odd—very!"

He must force himself to forget for a little time what had happened. He would go back in memory to those free ten years, to the glory and the fulness of their being. He had been in so many and strange places, known so many and strange conditions of life, of men and women. . . . Yes, he would go back, back in his mind, if his body might not follow. Like a kaleidoscope, scenes rose before him, a flash here, another there, nothing of much importance, just scenes that came in a wild jumble apart from their importance—a kaleidoscope that spun from continent to continent inconsequently. . . . He was in Egypt, standing aside to let the gaily-clad pilgrims pass, and suddenly he laughed at an odd face in the crowd. But Gore did not laugh, he was almost angry; he said there was nothing to laugh at, that it was beautiful because it was faith, and faith alone was never ridiculous.

How clearly he saw it all! How easily he passed from an English fog to draw in the sensuous breath of an orange garden, the orange sails flashing past on the golden Nile; for it was the hour of gold. Yet though his mental eyes might look on one scene, he could not forget that he was seated opposite Muriel on his wedding-journey; that there was a voice he could not still, dropping poison in his ears. *What a fool he had been to let public opinion marry them! What did public*

opinion matter, the opinion of the majority—"mostly fools"!

. . . He was riding in South Africa across a veldt like a brown undulating sea; for miles and miles no sign of life met his eyes, but an air like wine stirred his joyous blood, and he drew in his breath, and blessed the space of it all. . . . *Why in God's name had n't he escaped while there was yet time?*

. . . Back in Egypt again, the desert, a dead man, a dying horse . . . and a black cloud circling overhead. . . . *He could have thrown up the work offered in England, gone back to the unchained years. Why bid for fame and success? What have such toys to do with those who live too fiercely to grasp the passing bubbles?*

. . . That mining camp had never seemed real. It was a bit of Bret Harte; that was all. How they worked for gold, endured for it, died for it, many of them! How greed set brother against brother! How all the worst of man rose like scum to the top! He had worked with the rest, but the gold he had secured had done no more than pay his expenses—and his excesses. And here he was, married to the most respectable of women, to an institution, one might almost say! He chuckled grimly, and Muriel looked across at him astonished. Then she frowned, for his strange wild eyes were looking through her, past her, far away. She knew he had gone whence she might not follow, and an angry sense of further

disillusion and disgust fell upon her. *Already!* Why could n't he be pleasantly bright and amusing—this man who was said to be a humourist. A humourist! Then his face was an anomaly! But it was merely a face signed with the seal of tragedy, and sad, with all the grim sadness of the jester.

. . . And Mick was riding along the picturesque road of an Indian village in September, a road lit by the fireflies blazing in the trees, and thinking with his other consciousness.

"I could have said, 'There is some mistake. I never considered it an engagement: we never wrote. Your daughter had no right to "wait for me," and I—will not marry her!' " How easy it sounded, how simple—now!

. . . Russia! It had not appealed in spite of its barbarity; it was a land where the voice of the East sounded clearer than elsewhere. The Czar drove past, unending horror in his haunted eyes. Perhaps he, too, hated Russia. . . .

The untrodden ways of the world . . . they called to him shrilly, imperiously. And he walked with radiant eyes in lands where the two forces of civilisation, the word of God, and the whisky of man, entered hand in hand, creating a new Heaven and a new earth. . . . .

But Muriel sat opposite.

. . . He saw the bloody hand of a vile, dead king grow vast between him and the sky, and followed a track of blood and tears towards a Congo village. But men grow rich on rubber just the

same; the dead king was not the only vampire with insatiable maw. . . .

"Mick."

But Mick did not hear. He stood dreaming by the Black Sea, and saw the sun go down upon its wrath. . . .

"Mick, do you know where we are?"

He knew where he was—beneath a honey-coloured moon looking down on dead Carthage and dying asphodels, afar off the insistent throbbing of a drum, and laden camels passing swiftly across the skyline. . . .

"It 's Southampton West, and the man said we were to change here for Totton."

So they changed, Muriel for Totton, Mick for a quaint little Swiss châlet set on the top of a mountain.

. . . By Jove, this was rippin', right down rippin'! What an ideal companion Miss Elphenstonne made—but what a ponderous name for such a little body! He would call her the Elf—she could not deny she came from the land of elves. *He knew.* And what a gift—God what a divine gift! Where would it take her? Rather—where would it *not* take her? To the heights—as they stood together upon them now, he, throwing the edelweiss, with laughing words, at her feet. . . . (*How different was the Elf from Muriel: Muriel could never understand.*)

"The next station!" cried Muriel. "Thank goodness! We 're just there, Mick."

"Where?" he asked absently.

. . . The desert and Gore: nothing was ever going to be better than that. How young he was, how madly, deliciously young! Then suddenly the beauty of the past was blotted out and he shuddered before an ever-present horror, the vision of dead eyes staring in the sunshine, a man's clear blue, a woman's narrow and dark—and desert sand, pressed down upon the light of both. . . . And when he sat back his eyes were no longer vividly alive, or wild, or visionary; they were dead and glassy and unbeautiful; his healthy brown face an ugly sickly yellow.

Muriel started at sight of him. "Does travelling make you bilious?" she asked, in a tone of awful apprehension. "Thank goodness this is Totton!" She tore at the door.

He came back to realities with a jerk, his face assumed its normal colour. "I beg your pardon," he said quickly. "Allow me." And opened the door.

"It's raining worse than ever," shuddered Muriel, "but I suppose there 'll be a cab."

"A vehicle of some description, no doubt," he returned, guardedly.

CHAPTER II

THE "RICH UNCLE'S" COTTAGE

IT was raining harder than ever, and only one shabby cab waited outside the station.

"Be quick!" cried Muriel feverishly. "If someone else were to get it! I will see to the things."

Mick's eyes, alert enough now, swept quickly round the station, caught sight of a fat, bulging little woman with very black eyes. The corners of his mouth twitched, and he touched his wife on the arm. "Look," he cried, delighted, "a suet pudding tied inadequately in the middle, and a little overboiled. And currants for eyes—nice kind currants. Of course that long, lean, depressed-looking man is her husband. How marriage loves to tie up opposites, and laugh!"

"She 's going for the cab!" cried Muriel, in an agony.

"The *devil!*" ejaculated Mick, and made an ungallant attempt to forestall the rather absurd little body rolling along on its short legs. The long, lean man already ahead seemed to guess Mick's intention, for he made a frantic spurt

towards the cab, and reached it first. "Ours," he said triumphantly, glaring at Mick, with the usual hate of the average British traveller.

Mick returned to meet Muriel's reproaches, and the lean man proceeded to "boost"—no other word applied—his fat little wife into the cab.

Suddenly to his astonishment, she got out. "Those poor things must have it," she announced positively. "They 're honeymooners."

Her lean lord stared at her in amazement.

"What 's that to do with it?" he growled aggressively. "I got here first!"

"We were honeymooners ourself once," she said, a little absurdly.

"Huh!" said the man, who did n't want to walk, adding rudely, "Idiots!"

Mick thanked the kindly suet-pudding with a winning courtesy that rather amazed his wife, but, unfortunately, the cabman had no mind to be disposed of without a voice in the matter. He had had as much work as he wanted already, and the fat lady's house was close to his own. He eyed Mick and the piled-up luggage askance.

"Where be you going to?" he demanded, suspiciously.

"No Man's Land," returned Mick—apology in his tones.

"Ten mile! It can't be done, sir. It would n't be right to the horse." He turned to the lean man. "I can just take you, sir, since it 's close to my stables."

"O dear, I 'm so sorry," said the fat woman, eyeing Muriel with pity.

Muriel turned to her husband as the fat lady was driven away. "I want a cab," she said unreasonably. "You must get one. Look how soaked I am already. I feel as if I were going to have a bad chill."

A porter came up to Mick. "If it 's No Man's Land, maybe Harrison's cart would take you," he suggested. "They 're going back to the pig farm on the top of Piper's Hill."[1]

An uncouth lad in charge of the cart said he 'd do it as a favour for ten shillings, and the honeymooners were informed it was about their only chance of reaching their destination.

"Of course it 's different in the summer," added the porter, "but no one comes down at this time of the year."

The driver of the open cart, answering reluctantly to the name of John, said the luggage must be packed carefully, not to hurt the pig.

"What pig?" asked Muriel, aghast.

He pointed laconically with his whip, and an inquisitive snout peered over the tailboard.

"To go in a cart with a pig . . ." Muriel's voice shook at the indignity.

"Well, it 's as bad for him," said Mick cheerfully. "He thought he was going to have half the cart to himself, instead of which, we shall crowd him somewhat."

[1] The pig farm and Rose Cottage are entirely imaginary.

The porter gave a hand, and the boxes were hastily bundled into the cart, John unnecessarily reminding them not to forget the pig, while that animal turned wildly round in a circle. Then Muriel was assisted to a seat beside the driver, Mick got up behind, and the somewhat undignified procession started.

The damp husband sat behind the damp wife, and watched the wave coming out of her elaborately dressed hair, and her new costume meet its final Waterloo. Her feathers were mere waterspouts now, and seemed positively to enjoy squirting rivulets of water down her neck. He sat with a bicycle lamp on his knee, in case the light should fail before they reached their destination, thinking guiltily of the coats and umbrellas he had lost.

"I should have thought," snapped Muriel, turning her dripping head, "that after knocking about the world for ten years, you might have learnt how to take care of coats and umbrellas."

"They are only at Southampton West," he said apologetically, "and will come on to-morrow. I 'll bicycle down for them."

"When it 's fine—how useful!" her well-cut features were disfigured by a sneer.

Michael dared not trust himself to reply. He would have been furious had anyone applied the word "nerves" to him, but they would not have been very far wrong.

"You might—" She ended with a startled

scream; the pig had made a furious dart forwards and since her legs were in the way, Muriel failed to maintain her balance.

"Be quiet, Dick, will yer!" cried John, addressing the pig. Then he turned to Muriel. "Twist his tail, mem, if he 's tiresome," he advised.

"Twist his tail!" echoed Muriel, in dazed tones, while a spurt of laughter came from Mick.

John nodded confidentially. "Ay, that always does it. He 's a grand boar,—Dick, and likes goin' about an' winnin' at shows, but there 's times when he wants teachin' his place. So mind to twist his tail."

"Now 's your chance," grinned Michael, as the pig made another dash forward, and he caught him. "I 've got his shoulders; wrench his tail!"

"I don't want to *touch* his tail!" cried Muriel, in a fury.

Mick ceased from laughter, and let the pig go. They drove on in dreary silence. The long straight road from Totton to Cadnam, under the best conditions, is dull and without picturesque interest, but in November rain it was hideous. The road beyond Cadnam, pretty enough at other times, certainly looked no better under conditions such as these, and Uncle William's "silvern glades" were scarcely at their best. The whole thing was rather like a nightmare.

Michael sat hunched up, sullen and brooding.

"What a fool I have been!" was the burden of his thoughts. He was no gallant in his mind. Why had n't he seen the trap in time—and avoided it? But he had walked in quite innocently, and when he turned to go—lo! the door was shut! In marriage there is no going back. His own people regarded him as the family prodigal, and it was pleasant to be met with a kindly note of welcome from old friends, with a warm invitation to come and stay at the vicarage, to come straight off the boat if he would. Muriel he recalled dimly, as what he was vaguely pleased to call "one of the moonlight girls."

Doubtless there had been tender passages in the past. His recollection was of a pretty, rather insipid, maiden. No doubt she had developed since then, and she would, of course, be married. It would be nice to go back to the careless days of his youth—and they seemed to take his acceptance for granted.

The welcome was even warmer than he expected. They made him one of the family at once—but what a dull narrow family it was! Muriel took almost too much possession of him, and was vaguely sentimental. He marvelled to find her not a day older; not in the least changed, as far as he could remember. She showed him a broken sixpence, and asked, with a blush, if he had kept his too.

Not to hurt her feelings, he said he believed he had, though he had no recollection of a sixpence

at all, and then laughed—as if at mutual folly long past.

Muriel, however, did not laugh; she looked down with a smile, and a momentary alarm seized him—could it be, of all ridiculous things in the world, that Muriel, in her correct and "ladylike" way, imagined herself in love with him? Distance had apparently lent enchantment to the view.

He decided to leave next day. He had no wish for foolish love-making with a woman who bored him, but, as she said good-night, her hand lingering in his, looking very girlish, very appealing, very pretty, acting on sudden impulse, he stooped and kissed her upturned lips. A kiss of farewell for old time's sake!

But Muriel did not take it like that.

"I always knew you would be faithful, too, and come back to marry me in the end, as you promised!" she sighed, happily.

She did not see the look of startled horror in his eyes; she thought it was content that made him suddenly speechless. She really believed he was in love with her, as she imagined herself to be with him. She would never have married a man against his will—once she had understood it was against his will. It would have had to be put rather plainly—that is all.

She gave a little laugh and started for the door, "The others will be so pleased," she said shyly. "They always expected it, though they said it was silly to wait so long, that I might end by being

an old maid!" She laughed as one who has safely escaped a possible danger.

Then she went, and he stood staring like one in a dream. The vicar roused him, shook him warmly by the hand—and showed himself more businesslike than Michael would have believed possible. He also, it appeared, had expected it. The fiancé's relations also, so it was plain to all, had been but waiting for the formal announcement, and offered ready and thankful congratulations. Such a nice girl, so *safe!* The Bohemian would settle down now of course and become a creditable member of society. With Muriel, he would be forced to walk hand in hand with conventionality; she would undoubtedly see to that.

He certainly did not deserve such good luck, for, even across the Atlantic, there had blown strange stories, strange rumours, as to the ways of Michael Talbot. Even in England, where he imagined himself to be walking with much circumspection, his relations looked upon him as "wild." Now that he was married and settled down, it would, *of course*, be all right. It practically always was.

While Michael hesitated as to the way of escape, he was lost, and found all ways closed to him. Between them the relations—all very important and busy and greatly in their element—fixed the wedding-day—and fixed it rather soon.

It was pointed out to him by his sisters that he had kept the girl waiting for him ten years—the

best ten years of her life. How pretty and "smart" she was,—and how faithful!

The trap shut down with a final click then. How could he be an utter cad, how could he spoil the girl's life? Instead, he preferred to spoil two.

Mr. Higgins came quickly forward with the gift of a furnished cottage, where the nature studies Michael had been commissioned to write could be done in congenial surroundings, and practically free of expense. So Michael, who had landed healthy, happy, moneyless, and free, found himself within a few weeks with an assured and lucrative post on a good paper, and a wife who, as everybody said, had been "made for him."

While Uncle William, dozing replete over a roaring fire, grunted disjointed things as to love's young dream, the happy dreamers, in company with a restless and egotistical pig, bumped hopelessly along a never-ending road, huddled miserably on a veritable car of Juggernaut, chilled to the bone, appalled at fate and each other, famished, the very spirit dead within them.

Michael was frankly terrified at the future, and —at himself. The future he did not know; himself he knew too well. His life had been so full, had held so much experience, that he had often felt curiously old at thirty-one; now he knew that he was a great deal too young, for it might mean fifty years more—with Muriel.

He had been in England only a few weeks, yet already the call of freedom sounded, and the chains hung heavy.

The rain grew heavier, a sodden mist rose, the falling leaves lay dankly massed on the roads, death on their weary faces, the trees hung grey pessimistic heads, and an icy wind fell like a blow on the travellers.

Muriel wondered drearily how she could ever have thought "honeymoon" a romantic alluring word—her five unmarried sisters would not envy her, if they knew!

The pig shrieked with angry hunger and nibbled Muriel's calves; John devoutly hoped that he 'd get his ten shillings without a fuss; and the labouring horse cursed all the tribe of mankind. And still they crawled along the dimming interminable road.

"What is the fat lady's husband?" demanded Michael of John, breaking a rather desperate silence.

John spat contemptuously into the road.

"Him! Oh! a casher at the bank—Southampton West . . ."

"Cashier?"

"That 's what I said!" the youth lashed the tired horse angrily. "A casher, cartloads of gold passin' through his hands, and him no better for it." Scorn twisted his heavy mouth. "An' five ugly dartars—huh! An' a boy a fair terror!" Another flick at the horse.

"He certainly seems to have missed his opportunities," agreed Mick.

"*She* goes in twice a week, cheap days, to do her shoppin' . . . they lives in one o' them little new red brick houses comin' from Totton . . . but they can't afford to keep no servant though he *is* a casher . . . as if a pound or two o' them cartloads . . . !" The lean, long man was obviously a fool.

Michael nodded in grave agreement. "Plainly he lacks judiciousness," he said.

"There 's the pig again," complained Muriel pettishly. "Can't you keep it at the back, Mick?"

"The church," said John, pointing ahead, hoping to divert Muriel's attention from the antics of the valuable pig.

"Father's is much bigger and nicer," she retorted, with an angry sniff. She frowned to see her husband's eyes grow suddenly introspective. He was always "wandering." A fierce futile jealousy seized upon her; he was for ever going on alone, seeing something she could not see, hearing something she might not hear. And they were on their honeymoon, and she was a bride! He should have only one thought; there should be no unshared thing between them.

"What is it *now?*" she cried, exasperated.

Mick's eyes still held a mystical vision. He stared at the steep steps leading to the churchyard. "The sound of rain on a coffin," he said, dreamily.

"Coffins now!" cried the unfortunate young

wife, shivering. "What next? Mine, I suppose! I wish you would not behave like this, it is horrible."

He pulled himself together, forced a smile, and laughingly apologised.

"I am horribly sorry, and it 's a queer uncanny thing . . . my nurse warned me. She said the seventh son of a seventh son, and a Celt at that, was foredoomed to visions. I used to laugh then . . . I don't always laugh now. There 's some power at the back of things that makes me see what I have no right to see, know what it seems impossible I should know . . ."

"Then you must be mad!" exclaimed Muriel in horror.

His grey eyes laughed at her, still full of their dreams. "Not in the Hanwell sense of the word," he reassured her; "I 'm merely the victim of an extraordinary imagination, that is all. Still, from your point of view, no doubt I 'm a regular Mad Hatter."

"Your people are not like that, you cannot blame them."

"Blame them! Why should I? It is they who blame me. Let 'em—I know who gets the most out of life. Half the people one meets never live at all, as I would count life; they but vegetate in their little cabbage-patch. It 's odd," he went on musingly, "to think that my people have given me what they do not themselves possess—what a fascination lies in physiology! I wonder, will my children be Mad Hatters too?"

Muriel sat back rosy with offence; not because she did not care for children, she hoped for them; but because one ignored such possibilities at such a time. She was genuinely shocked. It was already beginning to occur to her that she had married a man who ignored nothing.

"No Man's Land," interrupted John, pointing to a tiny little hamlet. "We go up that hill yonder—where we 'll all have to walk, it bein' a nasty bit, an' the farm an' Rose Cottage be atop on the moors."[1]

Muriel cheered up a little at the thought of a cozy cottage and the "divine cooking" of Mrs. Hobbs. She walked up the rough hill with a better grace than Mick had expected, for it was very stony, and rivulets poured down it and over her thin, high-heeled shoes.

"It 'll be a nasty bit for our bicycles," he remarked, as he helped her along, "but I 'm glad we 're on the moors."

"That 's Pig Farm," announced John proudly.

Muriel looked without interest at the scattered sties. "What a lot of pigs," she cried, resentfully. "And look at that big pig-sty at the end there!"

John chuckled, and laughed, and chuckled, and gasped out at length, "*That* be Rose Cottage."

Muriel clung helplessly to Michael's arm. Speech was beyond her. The bridegroom swore softly, knitting savage brows in the semi-darkness.

[1] Cottage and pig farm imaginary.

"Good God! How like a rich relation!" he said at length.

The great and successful Uncle William had not appealed to him. He had thought him pompous, as well as more than a trifle vulgar and ridiculous. Now he hated him. To be crowded in that inadequate space for months with Muriel! It was unthinkable!

"Damn him!" he said viciously, "damn him!"

But Uncle William dozed repletely complacent by the fire just the same.

Though Muriel knew it was wicked to damn a rich relation, for once she did not care. "It can't be Rose Cottage, it can't!" she wailed.

"It does stand on a high hill," remarked Mick sardonically, "and commands an excellent view—of piggeries!"

Muriel laid down her head on his arm and wept tears of utter exhaustion and most bitter disappointment. Perhaps Mrs. Dalton had pronounced Rose Cottage almost *too* much like a smart shooting-box to prepare her daughter for realities. And the bridegroom continued to commit blasphemy on the matter of Uncle William and all that was his.

Then compunction stirred belated, and he turned to his wife. After all it was much worse for her. "Cheer up, old girl," he said kindly. "All the goods are not in the shop-window, and I daresay it will be cozy enough inside. At any rate there will be fire and food."

CHAPTER III

WHY THE BRIDEGROOM CONSIDERED THE CHAR-LADY A LUCKY DEVIL.

JOHN was busy handing their belongings out of the trap, and Mick helped him with the heavy things. The cottage door was flung open, and darkness, revealed rather than relieved by a guttering tallow candle, exposed.

"There is no fire," said Muriel tragically, her sobs ceasing with sheer horror.

Having dragged the last box inside the dark habitation, the attitude of John became defiant.

"Ten shillings is just nothin' at all for such a way and all them boxes," he announced.

Mick handed it over without comment, and John drove away towards the pig farm. *His* cottage, half a mile beyond it, was comfortable enough, and he had no intention of being persuaded to stay and "lend a hand." The Talbots entered the cold bare place in silence, shutting the door after them.

"It will be unnecessary to mention Uncle William in your prayers to-night," said Michael grimly.

"I was n't going to," whimpered Muriel. "And there does n't *seem* any Mrs. Hobbs!"

"But there 's a strong smell of whisky!" he grunted.

They stood stricken into silence. Muriel's feelings were too terrible for words, and Michael's words too terrible for utterance before a quite new wife.

"What a comedy—if only it had happened to someone else," he said at length. "Uncle William on his honeymoon for instance!"

"He went to a big hotel."

"Yes; he would."

"The smell of whisky always make me feel sick!" burst out Muriel.

"It 's the lack of it that upsets *me*," he growled. "It 's little more than the smell we 're goin' to see of it—or of Mrs. Hobbs either!"

"I should n't wonder if the wretched woman was lying dead drunk in a ditch somewhere," choked Muriel. "She used to drink—before she reformed."

"And now she 's reformed *and* drunk," retorted Michael. He had a sudden vision of a charwoman reposing, oblivious of rain, marriage, or any other trial, peacefully in a ditch.

"I only wish I was!" he muttered to himself.

Then he looked at the picture of sodden misery he had sworn to cherish. Something must be done, and done quickly. No fire, no supper, no whisky—Good Lord! *no whisky!* Fortunately his wild life had made him handy enough.

"Look here, Muriel, I 'll see if Mrs. Hobbs is to be found, first thing." He took up the bicycle lamp as he spoke. "She may n't be too far gone to do *something*—and she may n't have drunk it all," he added, hopefully.

He groped about the big living-room; even looked under the sofa for Mrs. Hobbs. He tried the back kitchen, the big bedroom upstairs, where two beds served as convenient water-catchers. He moved them out of the worst of the rain pouring from the leaking roof, and put a jug and basin to catch as much as possible. Then he put a discouraged face into the tiny attic over the back kitchen, which was to serve as his dressing-room, and came to the conclusion that neither Mrs. Hobbs nor the bottle were in the cottage. Finally, he discovered both in a ditch outside. She was lying on her back, the bottle—only too obviously empty—clasped to her bosom, and the lamp revealed her face covered with a smile of blissful content.

Michael stared at her gloomily. *She* had not just got married to someone she did not want; *she* was not conscious of the wet, supperless, whiskyless, irritated almost beyond endurance; *she* had n't an Uncle William in the family!

"Lucky devil!" he exclaimed, gazing at her enviously. "Lucky, *lucky* devil!" Then he returned to his wife. "'The world forgetting, by the world forgot'—in a ditch," he explained.

"Disgusting! But I knew it!" was Muriel's

comment. "Mick, I am chilled through. Suppose I get pneumonia, and no doctor for miles——"

"We should have brought the bottle ourselves——"

"Or no clergyman really close," pursued the gloomy Muriel.

"Would he lend me some do you think?" Mick brightened.

"I was talking of pneumonia, not whisky," in huffy tones.

"Of course you 'd want a doctor, but why a clergyman?" He was honestly puzzled.

"Father always visited the sick and read to them——"

"And did they ever recover?" he asked, solemnly, his lips twitching before a mental vision of his rigid and prosy father-in-law reading the offices of the sick over his recumbent body.

"That 's not the point. Sick people——"

"Oh, yes, of course," impatiently. "The odour of sanctity and all that—whatever your previous life may have been; but as we 're neither of us sick we may hope to escape that last unpleasantness. That fire's going to be alight in a few moments!" He looked with vicious determination at the damp *débris* in the grate.

"There are no sticks," she said, hopelessly. "I looked."

"Then here goes for one of Uncle William's chairs," he retorted. "May he eventually serve to light another fire!" He smashed up the chair

with gusto. It might almost have been the owner himself.

He was very busy for a few moments while his wife watched him—wondering how she was to endure life with this strange rough man. She dropped wearily at last into the long low chair by the hearth—only to spring up with a piercing scream.

"Good *God!* What 's the matter now!" burst from Michael, spilling the matches inside the damp fender.

"Hush . . . ! I sat on the brush and dust-tray—whatever did you put them down there for?"

"I did n't." He was groping, irritated, after the lost matches. "Why did n't you look before you leapt—sat, I mean?"

Muriel was too angry to answer. She watched her husband's attempts with sullen eyes, and was almost glad, when, after many efforts with damp matches to get damp wood and paper alight, he was driven back, choking, by volumes of smoke.

"Uncle William seems to have thought of so much for our comfort," he remarked, "that it seems a pity he should have omitted to send a postal order to the sweep to have the chimney swept. Take the lamp and see if you can find any paraffin about—unless she 's drunk that."

After, a long, dispirited search the young wife returned with the paraffin, her voice shaking with indignation as she described how she had found it,

keeping the solitary loaf company, in the bread pan.

For the first time Michael laughed—and his laughter was singularly boyish and light-hearted. "I say, Muriel, let 's pretend it 's funny!" he suggested.

"Funny!" cried Muriel, in indescribable tones. "You can call it *funny?*" Her voice rose in shrill indignation. "You would think it funny to roll down that awful hill, I suppose?"

"It would depend on the roller," he returned cheerfully. "Now, I can see our kind friend the suet-pudding bouncing along like an india-rubber ball, and though it would n't be funny to her, it would to the onlookers. It 's only when they happen to yourself that misfortunes of that type are n't funny—but how we should laugh if this were somebody else's honeymoon."

"I should n't," said Muriel, truly enough. "I should be too sorry for them, especially for her—"

"Well, on the stage—you 'd laugh then?"

"Only because it was *meant* to be funny," triumphantly, "and was n't true. It 's dreadful, not funny. A horrid, mousy-smelling, little, back kitchen with a fixed bath—such a common idea! What is it like upstairs?"

"It might be worse," he answered, cautiously, "after I 've got a fire going there too. . . ."

"Is it damp? Does the roof leak? I 'd rather be prepared for the worst."

"Well—you won't lack rain-water for your com-

plexion, but I 've moved the beds out of the worst, and we 'll dry them as soon as possible. I rather imagine it would be a case of sleeping under umbrellas if we had them. There seem to be more holes than roof. Your uncle promised that we should get close to nature, you know."

"And we 're doomed to this pig-sty for months and months! Uncle William is a mean wretch, but he can't live for ever, and then——"

"Billie" (he alluded to the youngest hope of the Daltons) "put it with dreadful vulgarity at your wedding. He said: 'Say! Does n't Uncle William look as if he might burst any minute, and he's my godfather, you know! Then I should keep a motor car and three ferrets with my share.' Still matters might be worse. After all, Muriel, the pig-sty is n't inhabited by a pig—I 'm not altogether that, am I, old girl?" He laid a dirty hand on hers.

She made no reply.

"Come, dear," he went on, with a cheerfulness he did not feel. "We 're dished now, so to speak, and have got to make the best of circumstances and each other. I 'll try if you will—" He ended with a sigh, for another woman's face rose, unbidden, before him. Why should he think of the Elf now?

Muriel drew her hand away, wiping it carefully on her handkerchief, thereby somewhat spoiling the whiteness of that article.

She had not expected marriage to be like this;

she had always looked upon it as something vaguely and conventionally romantic. It had been romantic to be in love at eighteen with a good-looking boy who was said to have a career before him—a boy who found no difficulty in saying very pretty things by the light of the moon. It was romantic to remain in love, and faithful for ten whole years, even though he seemed to have forgotten her, and it was useless writing since he had become a man without an address. Of course, if during those ten years a better match had turned up, she would have conquered her feelings and taken it—for the sake of her parents and sisters. It would have been her Duty. But nobody else had ever "made her an offer." They had always just stopped short of that. Once or twice at Uncle William's she had feared she might have to be put to the test, but, somehow, it had never got so far. The eligible had inspected—and gone away again. So she had remained faithful to the love of her youth.

It was very exciting when Michael Talbot came home—and to a post that might lead to really good things in the journalistic world. A friend who knew the needs of Fleet Street had said to her, "Talbot has all of a thousand or two thousand a year in those big fingers of his—if he would but settle down," and had added, though not to Muriel, "But, faith, he 'll never do that, or gather the moss; he 's a dreamer, sure, and the *wanderlust* will have his soul yet. He 'll be trekking for the

sea's highway, the East India Dock Road again, you mark my words, an' goin' aboard the first old hulk . . . we all know Mick Talbot, a clever divil, but queer, damn queer. . . ."

No, he had given Muriel the possibilities, not the probabilities. Michael Talbot did not even desire money; he could always make enough, by physical labour if need be, for the needs of the day, and his temperament knew no morrow.

Mick had come upon Muriel with a little sense of shock; he seemed very strange, very unlike the callow boy of her tepid love, very unlike the image she had set up. Still, when the first shock had passed she had assured herself that her feelings were unchanged. She would care just the same when she got accustomed to him, find, perhaps, he was not essentially altered after all. In the big sense of the word, neither a man, nor a man's love, were within her needs or understanding; she wanted what Mick could never give—the shallow echo of a shallow, callow love. Unfortunately, Mick's nature was not small enough for that and hers. He could give much; he could never learn to give little. With all his grave faults, he stood on a height miles above the vision of the woman he had married. Neither a hero, nor a good man, he yet had within him the possibilities of greatness, of nobility, of sacrifice. And Muriel had been born without possibilities.

No more the boy-lover but a stranger! Then came the assurance—when he kissed her—that

he had been faithful too; that she had remained through ten long years his own ideal. She was very simple for all her shrewdness. For a moment she was visited by a light such as never shone on her again. She had strained upwards to the face of love through the veil of illusion. Later, the veil was rent--and there was only blankness behind.

During the short engagement, she was too busy with her trousseau to see much of Michael, and she thought it very good of him not to bother her. It never dawned upon her that the less he saw of his *fiancée*, the more he was pleased.

Then, three days ago, marriage, and disillusion after disillusion. She had not married the boy at all, she had married a stranger, a man of many moods—of a type she most of all disliked and distrusted. There was nothing left but to make the best of it.

If only Michael were not so—so primitive (that on the whole seemed the best word), so uncivilised! Later on, when he became successful and saved money, it would be easier. There would be a nice home, perhaps even a certain position: she would have her social life, her children, he, his work. But sometimes it took rather a long time to be successful.

"How thoughtful you look!" he said, tapping her knee. "When the weather changes we'll be as jolly as sandboys."

"Oh yes!" she assented absently.

Her thoughts took a slightly different trend.

What a pity women had to marry anybody they could, or be old maids! What a pity clergymen so often had such huge families. It seemed very curious. What a pity that in her own case there had been six unmarried and rather stupid and ignorant daughters, with nothing but marriage, or ill-paid drudgery, to look forward to! What a pity one fell in love so easily at eighteen, and out as easily at twenty-eight! Mick was a stranger—not even a nice stranger. He had all sorts of "dreadful ideas." He had not even the consideration and decency to hide them; and he was continually offending her sense of ultra-refinement. He was so coarse and vulgar! It was hard, for only he had changed; she was just the same, not "a day older in any way." (She was very proud of that.) Why had things gone wrong from the start? Why had the rich relation done this cruel evil to them? Why had they to appear grateful for the sake of possible benefits to come, and because it would be wasteful in their position to pay for a house, when they could get one for nothing? Why had Aunt Susan withheld the expected cheque? Was her poisoned dart true—and *did* Mick possess the awful artistic temperament of which she had heard so much, and never anything good?

And finally, why was Mrs. Hobbs drunk, and the dust-tray left in the chair?

"I 'll get the damned thing to light if I sit here for a week!" exploded Mick.

His wife eyed him with increased disfavour, making no allowance for justifiable irritation. "I think you forget," she said, in her best manner, "that a gentleman does not swear before a lady."

"And you forget—that you are n't a 'lady' now," grinned Mick, "but merely my wife. *I 'm* not a gentleman, never was, never will be. Why, woman alive, I have n't a single gentlemanly attribute—a settled income, a motor-car, even really decent shirt-studs!" He laughed, unenviously, adding, "Nor want 'em!"

"But you have to try for them," said Muriel, clasping her hands tightly. "Those are the sort of things that matter, that a man owes his wife. It is n't so much the doing without. It 's knowing other women know you have to, and look down upon you and snub you and despise you——"

He stared at her in genuine surprise. "But *do* they? I mean, are there women like that?"

"Of course there are——"

"But why know them?" His brows were knit. "They must be rather impossible sort of people. I should not like my wife to recognise them."

"Oh, Mick, how can you be so foolish, talk such nonsense! Probably they would not even call upon me, let me be in their set——"

"Set?" His eyes were wide with amazement. "Do you mean you wish to be rich, so as to be in a rich set, irrespective of whether your so-called friends are nice or intelligent or well-bred? Good Lord!"

"I wish you were an author instead of a journalist," she frowned. "It sounds so much better, and comes in handy at teas—"

"Handy at teas?"

"For talking about. I wish you 'd write a book that would make you rich and famous right off."

"I 'll become an author to please you—and hang the expense!" he said gaily. "In fact I always intended to write a book when I stayed long enough anywhere. Do you mind holding the matches for a moment? There! The fire is alight at last, and I 'll have a go at the other. It 's sure to stop raining to-morrow, and, anyway, a bad beginning is better than a bad ending. Mrs. Hobbs will be as a worm that turneth not in the morning, and you 'll have the housewifely joy of putting the fear of the Lord into her!"

"Don't be profane! I wish you 'd remember we 've been religiously brought up."

Mick gave an expressive whistle. "So *that* was why Tom ran away to sea," he observed thoughtfully. "I 've often wondered."

CHAPTER IV

THE CHAR-LADY RISES TO THE OCCASION

IN stating that matters would be sure to improve on the morrow, Michael was optimistic rather than correct. If it were possible for it to rain harder, it did so. The mist thickened, coldness, bareness, utter desolation, were all around. The moors were nothing but a sea of mist and rain. Except the pig farm, which was too near for their taste, and the woodman's cottage, there was no sign of life about the place. Sometimes a weird shape rose out of the gloom, and a forest pony fled startled past them. It was all very appalling to Muriel Talbot.

The cottage was only half furnished, and icy draughts penetrated everywhere. Michael wired for some furniture from London but it went to the Dock station instead of Southampton West, and was stuck there for some days.

Mick blamed the furnishing company, but Muriel blamed Mick, and could not, or would not, let the subject drop.

Mr. Higgins wrote a gracious line,—the letter of a benefactor to those infinitely benefited and cor-

respondingly grateful—congratulating them on "being as snug as two birds in their cosy nest before the rain came on," and hoped they had more than realised their expectations in every way. And Muriel wrote back, the letter of the benefited, and said they had.

The bath was another trouble. A bath in the back kitchen seemed a "very low and indecent idea" to Muriel, and not any the less so, when she discovered, to her horror, that the rutty lane leading past the window was the highroad of the farm people, and that the window was indecorously large and blindless. She became positively tragic on the subject of the bath.

That the matter troubled Michael so little, was another grievance. He merely made a joke out of it. "Of course being a journalist and prospective author," he grinned, "I should learn to rejoice in the blaze of publicity. Many of the leading citizens of No Man's Land must know me quite well already. I shall probably end by being famous as 'the man in the bath' and attain to the lasting pinnacle of fame achieved by 'the Man in the Mask.' Once I was afraid I had too much modesty ever to become really successful as an author. It 's a sad disability." All the same, he went to a great deal of trouble to hang garments, that did not always keep fixed, over the window in the early mornings.

"I shan't have another bath till the blind comes," announced Muriel defiantly. "I dare n't! The

skirt *would* go all askew just as I got into the bath, and I couldn't risk getting out to put it straight, and then the postman—" she broke off with a shudder. "Mick, you must speak to the postman!"

"What did he do?" asked Michael, with real interest. "Post letters at you in the bath?"

"He simply thundered at the door instead of going round, and shouted for it to be opened. Then when I pretended I was n't there——"

"In spite of the skirt all askew?"

"He fumbled ever so hard at the latch, and you know how rotten everything is. Oh, it was horrible! *Then*, he went to the window and began to poke about to see if anyone was there—and I got my hair all wet lying in the bottom of the bath and was nearly drowned. He 's a dreadful man! You must tell him, never on any account, to go round to the back kitchen, even it if is a short-cut for him. The whole bath arrangements are simply an outrage! I 'd like to see Uncle William have *his* bath there!" she added fiercely.

Michael, purposely misunderstanding, affected to be horrified at such a dubious wish, and Muriel was shocked at his jesting words. But then she was so much more often shocked than not.

Michael could only shrug helpless shoulders. Every hour spent together deepened the feeling of strain; every day the distance between them grew. Even their silences were antagonistic. They were so appallingly close in the poky cottage—and so appallingly far! There were times when Mick

was fain to hope that he might not come to hate his wife in the end; for that awful thing reared its head between them.

Discomfort that could have been endured under different circumstances with a light enough heart, was well-nigh intolerable.

The place was like a barn; half the necessaries of existence were lacking. Upstairs the water still poured through the roof, the steady drip, drip of rain murdered sleep, and the wind screamed fiendishly through the broken panes.

There was nothing to mend them with; he had tried brown paper, but that had been drenched by the rain and quickly torn away. The joiner Mick had unearthed said he was coming—but never came. Things began to get badly on his nerves—the dreariness, the constraint, the steady drip of the rain at night, the breathing, a few yards away, of the wife he had never wanted, and for whom he felt a positive distaste at such times. She was part of the new chain civilisation had flung round his neck. He was never to be free of her, and what she stood for, till death set him free. Death which lay perhaps half a century off!

He would lie awake with the song of Vagabondia calling in the night watches; with syren voices singing in his ears—and how mocking the call of freedom sounded to a bound man! How far away the healing touch of the sea, the wild, wet, howling roadway he loved! "In the dead, unhappy night, and when the rain is on the roof," he quoted to

himself one dawn, while the face of another than his wife beckoned him out of the grey gloom, smiled at him elfishly.

"If only I had guessed in time it was like that!" he thought despairingly. "But how was I to know?"

He had had no suspicion till it was too late. Who could guess that such a thing would grow out of a three weeks' intimate friendship in the little inn of a wild Swiss mountain pass? He had had other friendships, held them still; but no such madness had come of them.

In the morning, however, he would thrust such thoughts away, and try to cheer up the woman tied to him; for, after all, the tragedy must be hers as well. He would point out how much worse it might have been, and remind her that the man really *was* coming to mend the roof. But Muriel merely thought him flippant.

Mrs. Hobbs appeared on the third day of their martyrdom, entering with an air of righteous determination that rather startled Michael, who saw her coming first.

"What is she like?" asked the bride nervously, for after all to lose Mrs. Hobbs would be unthinkable.

"A cataclysm, or the Day of Judgment," he returned. "Anything else would understate it. She is also the most appallingly respectable-looking female I ever saw—and the ditch episode can only have been an optical illusion! I don't think I

should say much or anything if I were you, and she 's quite ten feet high. I think I 'd better go, a man is rather in the way at domestic crises," and, in spite of his wife's contemptuous glance, he went and hid himself in the dim angle of the stairs where, himself unseen, he could hear and see everything. He hoped Muriel would not offend the lady who could cook so divinely.

The young wife might have been excused for shirking her task; the very big gaunt lady was formidable in more senses than one. Moreover, she looked absolute mistress of the situation. Her right eye glittered as might a general's on the eve of warfare and certain victory; her left, and less respectable, orb had a watery inclination to roam cornerwise. Mick drew his long legs closer out of range.

Muriel, however, fired the first volley. "Why were you not here on Thursday?" she enquired. "There was nothing ready; no fire, no food, and—the paraffin was in the bread pan!"

Mrs. Hobbs cocked a contemptuous eye—the right one—"In the bread pan," she repeated; "I 've no patience with such ways! Sluts!"

"And who left it there?" enquired Muriel.

Mrs. Hobbs confessed the problem beyond her.

"You were n't anywhere to be found," went on the young wife, "and—neither was Mr. Talbot's whisky."

Michael admired the courage of his wife even while he wondered at it.

He never would have dared mention the loss of the whisky to such a rigidly respectable woman. Impossible to believe she had taken it! Impossible to believe he had seen her lying in the ditch! He would as soon have accused an archbishop.

"I was havin' one of me worst attacks of neuralgy," said Mrs. Hobbs decidedly. "Somethink frightful they is—Ho yus! The sufferin' is somethink croil, and I 'm dead to the world——"

"Yes, dead to the world in a ditch."

"It comes over me anyw'ys and I drop like a felled ox. Ho yus!"

"You were *drunk* in the ditch," accused Muriel.

"Now she 's done it!" muttered Mick apprehensively.

Mrs. Hobbs fixed Muriel with a stern right eye, while the other roamed round so oddly that Mick cramped his long limbs into a yet smaller space. "Who are you a-libellin'?" she demanded. "Weaknesses I may have, owin' to pains in my head, but whisky ain't one of them, and can be bought anytime as good as his 'n with my own money. Come down in the world I may have through no fault of me own, but I 've got a character just the same. I 'd have come on Thursday in spite of my head if I had n't heard as Mr. Talbot—which I expect is an alibi—was a—journalist." The icy scorn expressed in the last word was a masterpiece.

"What 's that to do with it?" enquired the galled Muriel.

"Nothink much," sarcastically, "only I kept a

boarding-'ouse for sich-like for years. I learnt their wiys—that 's all! Never in o' nights, long o' goin' to press—so *they* said. Never piyin' rent regular cos o' heditors turnin' nasty and not knowin' their business! Never doin' anythink like a Christian. Give me a nigger any diy—heven a converted one! Regular Holy Joes journalists—I don't think! Such *real* gents! Ho yus! And I had one lodger what behaved decent—*for* a journalist—but what does '*e* go and do?"

"Nothing of any interest to me, or bearing on the question——"

"I asks you as man to man what does '*e* go and do?" repeated Mrs. Hobbs loudly. "He brings a lidy 'ome one hevenin'. 'Me wife,' he says smilin'. I had me doubts, but I said nothink. A few weeks later he brings another. 'Me wife,' he says smilin', again. I was for outin' them then and there, but me husband he siys he 's seen quick widowers an' marriers. Then no more 'n six months liter he brings another. 'Me wife, Mrs. Hobbs,' says he, introdoocin' us, laffin. I showed him my marriage lines. 'We don't take Mormons,' says I, sarcastic, and houted 'em then and there, though it was good money lost. Ho yus! Since then, when a journalist talks of his wife, I asks to see 'er lines, and afore I obliges *you*, perhaps you 'll oblige *me* by showin' 'em! Ho yus! I *don't* think."

"How *dare* you!" choked Muriel. "You wicked, abandoned woman! As if——"

"I 've me character to consider same as any duchess," returned Mrs. Hobbs fiercely," and much journalists and their lidy friends care about *that!*"

"How dare you call me a 'lady friend'!' almost sobbed Muriel, overcome by this last, great indignity, while Michael was overcome in a different way. The rigid Muriel so maligned!

"You want to be called 'Mrs. Talbot'! Ho yus! They alwiys did!"

"You were lying dead drunk in the ditch with the whisky!" accused the goaded Muriel.

Mrs. Hobbs drew herself up to her vast height. Mick, with a little shiver, wondered when she was going to stop. How brave women were! To think of Muriel defying such a dragon.

"*Hindeed!*" returned the dragon. "And who thought they saw me doin' that? You?"

"No—my husband."

"O Lor!" muttered Mick, making himself very small indeed.

"Are you referrin' to Mr. Talbot? Don't you know journalists is alwiys seein' things—specially things as never 'appened? Ho yus! *It's what they're pied for*—when they *are* pied!"

"Mr. Talbot *did* see you——"

"Then tell him to stop skulkin' on the stairs an' come down an' siy it to my fice!" burst out the offended lady, in truly terrible tones.

Michael came down, rather an abject figure at that moment, and the two women eyed him with deepest scorn.

"An' ''usband' to be proud of—I don't think!" remarked Mrs. Hobbs sardonically.

"You did see her drunk in the ditch, did n't you, Mick?"

"Yes, that 's what I 'm askin' you?" put in the accused, her fierce right eye boring into the recesses of his being.

"Could n't think of it. I mean, I did n't!" muttered the wretched coward, plunging for the door.

Mrs. Hobbs, still focussing him with her fearful right eye, barred his exit. "If you 're in the 'abit of seein' things like that, you miy as well hown up to it, and be done with it," she said sternly.

Mick gazed at her in rueful admiration.

"I deny the awful impeachment," he said, at length.

"Never mind my feelin's. Tell a 'lidy to her fice she was drunk if you feels like it. Your lidy here says you missed the whisky an' found it along o' me in a ditch——"

"Only the empty bottle" said Mick apologetically. "Please overlook it for once!"

"That I put the paraffin in the bread pan?" she thundered at him.

Mick crawled abjectly.

"Oh, *I* did that," he owned, "and of course it was I that drank the whisky. My wife must have misunderstood me completely. And I do hope you 'll forgive us and stay and oblige." And his powerful arms removed Mrs. Hobbs from the door.

"Oh, *Mick!*" wailed the indignant, betrayed Muriel.

"Fancy keepin' 'ouse along of a feller like that!" sniffed the mistress of the situation. "You *do* seem to 'ave brought your pigs to a queer markit! An' I 'll siy this for you, you *look* respectable enough, but so did others I could nime——"

"Will you go, woman? You are discharged!" Muriel stamped her foot.

"I brought my 'lines' along, and I 'll show 'em against yours any diy. Ho yus!" returned Mrs. Hobbs, flourishing a document as she spoke. She had indeed brought her "lines": not so much as a sign that she was respectable, but with the idea—perhaps hope—the other woman might be otherwise and consequently completely crushed by the sight.

"Take them away—they are nothing to me—"

"I don't expect they are. Would n't know the looks of 'em, I dare say. Journalists never do marry their own wives. There 's only one set of folks what 's worse, and them 's artists as I took it too, with folks goin' about in broad diylight without their clothes, to be painted and no relation. So I wish you good-morning." And the char-lady, the honours of war thick upon her, turned grandly to go. She was the only "treasure" of the neighbourhood, and right well did she know her own value.

"Oh, Muriel!" floated an imploring voice from outside the window.

Muriel gulped, thought of their three days' discomfort and the reputed powers of Mrs. Hobbs, and lowered the flag of her pride.

"Of course people in my position don't carry their marriage certificates about with them," she said loftily, "but since you are so curious, there 's an account of my marriage." And she handed a marked paragraph in the local paper of her father's parish to the virtuous char-lady.

Mrs. Hobbs took it languidly, and began reading it slowly.

"Clergyman's dartar," she said, at length. "I 've worked in many a clergy's 'ouse. He 's struck it lucky, I don't think! Maybe he has his excuses, though a journalist. Ho yus! Pore devil! Well, he 'll 'ave to seem to be respectable for a bit, whether he likes it or not!"

"You need not pity me because I have married an author," remarked Muriel, holding her head very erect. That she must endure this woman's insolence!

"Pity! Ho yus! I pities you both! I suppose chances was far and few between down your part, an' lidies has to clinch on to what they can get, and no choice or taste, or be left on the shelf! I 've knowed nice lookin' gals what could n't get a real man for a 'usband an' had to put up with a curick an' pretend they liked it—an' though a bit wild lookin', Mr. Talbot is a fine figger of a man. I 'll say that for 'im! And there ain't no mischief to be got into 'ere and no week-end Paris trips such

as my lodgers was always agoin' on. . . . Would you mind movin' Mrs. Talbot, m'am? I 'm goin' to put the place to rights—it 's more like a pig-sty than anythink—and get your dinner ready. That is a fine looking gent on the table there! Not your father, surely? In grand clothes, too. Would he be a friend of the family, now?"

"That is my uncle," said Muriel, "the Mayor of Little-Hole. He 's been Mayor three times, and that scarf-pin (it was very cleverly given the next place of honour to Mr. Higgins himself) was presented to him by a royal duke."

Mrs. Hobbs was impressed at last.

"A real live lord mayor in the family!" she exclaimed, awed. "I might have seen you was 'igh-born. I 'm sure all this is a sad come-down to you. Is he a lord or a sir? He 's as fine as any dook!"

"No," owned Muriel reluctantly.

"Well, that 's to come—anyone can see it with 'alf an heye. Ho yus!"

She tidied up for a very short space of time, and gave them a meal fit for a prince; in fact Mick had eaten a far less luxurious and well-cooked one in the company of a prince, more than once. Muriel, she treated with friendly respect, and to Mick, though scornful, she was not outwardly rude. Such was the treasure they had secured.

CHAPTER V

MICK IS OVERTAKEN BY CONSCIENCE AND A PET PIG

THE rain had ceased at length, and the bridegroom waited patiently while Muriel tried on three trousseau hats and finally appeared in a fourth, attired as if for a fashionable promenade. And they were to all intents and purposes alone upon a wide stretch of moors: at the most they would meet a working-man, but it was much more probable that forest ponies alone would receive the benefit of Muriel's bridal glory!

The incongruity jarred Michael, but he only said, "How smart you are—and all for me!" And gave her arm a little squeeze.

She deigned to smile in answer and they set out for their walk, an incongruous couple enough! He, with the salt taste of the seven seas upon his lips, the mad desire of them rioting in his blood; she, whose horizon was bounded by a showy suburban villa.

"If we go up Bramble Hill we can get a superb view and see the forest for miles," said Mick, "but it 'll be fearfully muddy. The road to God's Hill is level and dry."

"Oh, God's Hill—what an odd name!" returned Muriel, and they set off across the moor highway, both rather silent.

Mick's conscience was reproaching him. After all, he was responsible for this woman and for her happiness. He had not undertaken the thing willingly, but he had undertaken it: it was irrevocable. Whose fault was it that though she had believed herself in love with him on their wedding-day, she had had no such illusion a week later? Not all hers surely. If she tried him much, it was possible he tried her even more. There was her view to be taken into consideration, as well as his own—and he had only looked out of the one window. She had never wronged him in her thoughts, but daily in his own heart was he faithless to her. If there had only been something! But mentally, morally, physically, she left him cold. He could not even admire her good looks, they were not his "style." "Blank beauty," he rather cruelly, if truthfully, called them. Just the outward hand of nature, nothing that came from within, no character, no expression, and eyes as cloudless as shallow! Ten years had not marred her beauty, had taken nothing away, but neither had it given her anything. She had gained nothing. When youth and beauty should go at last, time would write no attractions there, that most terrible thing of all would be left—blank age—a husk that had never held a kernel.

To do Mick justice, he did want to get to care

for his wife for both their sakes, to drive away some one who had no right to stand between them. But because it was his duty, and never his pleasure, he could not do this thing; not yet at least. The best he could do at the time was to compliment her on the unsuitable costume.

She brightened quickly at that, then her face fell. "But my trousseau will be wasted and old-fashioned by the time we get back to civilisation," she complained.

"Can't one buy another?" he asked vaguely. "When the money-making book is out, I mean?"

"*Will* it make money? So many—most—don't! Shall we ever be able to live in a nice, gay suburb and have lots of nice society?"

"Let 's hope so," he answered, thinking with horror of "the gay suburb and nice society." "But, of course, that depends upon whether it 's a success."

"It *must* be a success," she cried feverishly. "I could not *bear* it if it failed—and then failure is always ridiculous."

He winced for a moment, for, after all, he had been a failure. He might have been established as a risen journalist, with a good balance at the bank, but he had chosen those ten pagan years instead, and he was still, at thirty-one, in the making. And there was his school-fellow, Pat O'Hara, a man with no more of his talents, and half his chances, made.

"I 've known successes more ridiculous," he

said at length a little bitterly, "and once I knew a failure that was . . . magnificent. But you could not be expected to understand that, could you, Muriel?"

"I only understand common-sense," said Muriel crossly. "Success can be magnificent, failure never!"

"Don't you think it depends a little on the aim? The chap I mean aimed at a little thing, a certain cheap notoriety, and got it. But the failure . . . well he was a bigger man altogether, he despised facile success, would have nothing but the greatest, and since the greatest never came to him, he was content to be counted among men as a failure. So —you are not cut out for the wife of a failure. Well, we must see what we can do to be what you would call a success."

"I believe you *can* if you try You must have talent even to write these dull nature things and silly vagabond articles; and they seem to pay for them awfully well! If you would only go in for *paying* novels. . . . Oh, I would be so patient, so proud of you!"

He stood silent, trying to turn his back upon the lost freedom.

"God knows it 's little enough I 've brought you!" he said, at length; and did not altogether allude to his banking account, though Muriel took him literally.

"I 'm so glad to have awakened ambition in you!" she cried.

He said nothing, for he knew she had not wakened it, but killed it; made it even a little ridiculous. Her insensitive common-sense was so like a douche of cold water.

"Only stupid people fail," she declared. "How I hate stupidity!"

Again he said nothing. He had never known anyone quite so stupid as his wife: had not even realised there were such women, till he married one, when he began to wonder if they were even rare. Yet the grain of worldly shrewdness which he lacked, was deeply rooted in her. For all her stupidity she was of the women who nagged their husbands into success—or suicide. She would be a social success, too, in a dull decorous set; for she would never know that it was dull.

"How lovely it must be when there 's a private income!" she sighed longingly. "But we have not even a hundred pounds in the bank."

When Muriel talked like this, and her conversation was apt to run in the same lines, he became possessed by something akin to terror lest she should ever learn how much money he *had* made—and spent. For he had made money. That was the curious, incongruous gift that clung to the man Patrick O'Hara laughingly called "The Mad Celt": despite himself he had to make money. He did not want it; he never sought it. It just came—and went. He fled from opportunity—and opportunity followed. He had an extraordinary fascination for his fellow-men: it was their pleasure

and privilege to do him a good turn. To him they stuck closer than a brother: wherever he went, in high places and in low, the warm hand of liking and fellowship grasped his. "If it is n't the good old bird of passage!" they would say, delighted, and a dozen invitations would shower upon the man who had need of none. The love of many men, and many women, went with him throughout his days.

Many of his friends had achieved richness, had sought to point out the easy road, but Mick always shook his head. "None of your yellow fever for me!" he would say. "A heavy heart and heavy flesh seem to go with full pockets. The gold-mania is worse than seven devils; it rends you limb from limb."

Yet he cherished a demon greater than all the seven devils put together, a demon that would tear the soul out of him, as O'Hara had foretold, and people believed O'Hara knew. He had entered Fleet Street with less than his friend's talents and infinitely fewer opportunities, and was one of the first men of his day.

Mick would never be that: he could never be anything—save himself. O'Hara had a care for the morrow, Mick for the hour. He turned from those who would rend from him the joy of the day to tie upon him the burden of a day that might never dawn.

"You 're usurers, gamblers, all of you," he declared. "It 's no good, you beggars, you don't catch me dealing in 'futures.'"

But now he was married he would be compelled to take up the hated burden. If only she never guessed how much he had wasted—rather worse than wasted! He frowned at unpleasing memories. What a curse a perfect memory was!

It was not so much that he did not care for money as that he cared infinitely more for other things. O'Hara put it in his own way when he said, "Put a thousand pounds in one hand and a sunset flamin' over a new land in another, and ask Mick to choose—and he 'd take the sunset ivery time! He 's the boy for visions and shadows, and the dear knows where they 'll land him, and what 'll the end of him be—an' the big gift of the man rottin' an' rottin'."

Yes, a wise man would have bound the burden to his back, had something to show now: there would have been the income Muriel coveted so much.

"All of ten thousand pounds, one way and another!" he muttered, aghast—"though the dear knows where it came from, or where it went! And God forbid *she* ever should!"

He gave vent to an expressive whistle. He defended his own folly. He had gone to see the world, to learn, not to make money, and he *had* seen the world, and he *had* learnt. Of course he had written his hasty articles because he could not always help writing, but he had never expected them to catch on as they did, or make such big sums of money; then his friends, confound them!

would thrust him into mining speculations, and the wretched things always turned out as these millionaire acquaintances said they would. He had certainly made some thousands altogether during his stay in Africa, but he 'd managed to get rid of them before he set forth for another long journey. He had fitted up more than one big-game shooting expedition and it had n't been done for nothing—or diamonds picked up for a song either, even in Africa. He had never been so poor as after his successes among the mine magnates, but in New York a man he knew had got him on to a certain paper, and they gave him twenty pounds a week in exchange for the new blood he put into the anæmic thing. At the end of a few weeks he departed, without the formality of notice, for the Rockies, and had a glorious time. He had chummed up with a fellow-sportsman who turned out to be no end of a good sort—if a royal prince incognito! He had never had a better time in his life, but the money had not lasted very long. He had returned unashamed to New York, and the editor had damned his soul with fearful invective, and offered him thirty pounds per week to stop a bit. He had stopped, done wonders with the paper, and been pretty well top-dog. Then the proud proprietor of an enormous newspaper syndicate had offered him two thousand pounds a year as editor of the chief paper. To the amazement of all who knew him, the brilliant young journalist actually stayed in this post for six months, and earned his money too. Then,

just as the proprietor, who was delighted with the young man, and was his friend as well as his employer, was congratulating himself on the cure of the wanderer, Mick heard, one spring day in his office, the voice that he knew, and never turned a deaf ear to. He packed his bag then and there, and, when dawn visited the sleeping city, passed gaily through it, his feet dancing to the old magic.

Then other lands, other opportunities, other vagrant articles, a name always in the making, never made; one step forward, three backwards. Angry editors, grieved friends, frustrated opportunities!

Ten thousand pounds! He shuddered. How awful! If Muriel had that, all safely invested, how happy she would be! A staring red-brick villa with prim curtains and trim-kept paths loomed before him. What an escape! His body would be there, his soul on the highway of wild seas and wilder lands.

Ten thousand pounds! He had forgotten that it could mount up to so much. What had become of it all?

Much had gone on women, the half careless, half contemptuous, fancy of the moment, but more had gone on sport, and perhaps most of all in exploration expeditions. Always the going on, the new city, or the untrodden way, to visit. He had travelled *en prince* with a prince of the blood, and he had travelled as a beggar with outcasts, and

it had not mattered much either way. The only thing that mattered was to get farther, and yet farther.

Now, the only thing that mattered was to make money for the woman beside him to buy a prison for them both: a red-brick prison, shut away from the sea and the wind and the call of the unknown. He must mould himself upon the glorious example of obese Mr. Higgins.

He threw back his head and laughed long and loudly at the absurdity of the idea, and Muriel stared at him annoyed.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded.

"I 'm afraid I——"

He got no further, for piercing shrieks were borne to them from the cottage next to John's, which they were just passing.

"Oh!" cried Muriel, turning white. "Oh, they are killing pigs! Go and tell them not to!"

Before Michael could answer, the unwilling party to the affair, a small active animal, came tearing towards them, hotly pursued by a butcher, whose cart was tied to the gate of the cottage, and the interested John.

"Tell them they must n't!" repeated Muriel, horror in her eyes.

"Oh . . . . all right," said Mick, feeling very foolish.

"Hi!" shouted the butcher, " stop 'im, can't you?"

Rather cleverly Mick caught the hairy, squealing pig and held him till the two men came up. "How much?" he asked.

The butcher, who had just bought the animal cheap for several reasons, stared. What was it to this gentleman?

"I happen to want a pig," announced Mick firmly, "and rather fancy the—er—build of this brute. What 's the price?"

"Five pounds," returned the butcher promptly, by no means averse to profiting from the folly of a fool.

"They came cheaper in—Chicago," returned Mick, drily.

"Pigs run heavy here," retorted the butcher, looking obstinate.

"Oh, very well. Can you call for the money? We 're at Rose Cottage?"

The butcher touched his hat.

"I 'll call round that way. It 's me you buy your meat from, though the boy usually takes the cart. You 'll be all right with the pig till you come to the killin' of 'im. Then you 'll 'ave to look mighty nippy! You see when 'e were a day old 'e was taken into the 'ouse by the childer and trained as a pet, and 'e don't take kindly to bein' bacon, so to speak. Got a bit beyond 'imself an' that 's the fac'. Had a blue ribbon an' a bell and slept on the 'earthrug and did n't think nothink good 'nough for 'im till they got fair sick of it and sent for me. . . . Good-day to you both!"

The couple, left alone with their remarkable pet, eyed one another foolishly.

"She seems to understand," said Muriel, patting the purchase, "and I believe she 's grateful. Look, she 's following us just like a dog!"

"Of course," said Mick apologetically, "it 's not actually an extravagance. He 'll eat the waste, won't he, and be an economy?—like they are in Ireland. Still, it 's awkward not having a sty. Uncle William never thought of that, it seems."

"She can live in the back kitchen."

"But will she *stay* in the back kitchen?" he wondered.

She would n't! The brute squealed in a heart-rending fashion till they let it into the living-room, but, to do it justice, once it obtained its own way it was quiet enough. It squatted drowsily by the fire as one who has obtained no more than one's just rights. When meal-time came it moved close to the table and waited expectantly. The scraps that fell to its share seemed but to serve as an appetiser. The newcomer had no idea of being an economy if it could help it.

"We 'll have to buy meal and rotten potatoes," remarked Michael, eyeing the creature without much enthusiasm.

"Oh Mick, not *rotten!* And of course a ribbon and a name—can't you think of something nice for her?"

"Uncle William—we might get even on Uncle William."

"Don't be silly! I mean a name like Maggie—only suitable."

Mick grinned. "Why not Esmerelda-Who-Would n't-Be-Bacon?"

"Esmerelda? Come here, Esmerelda!"

And Esmerelda came for a tasty scrap, so that Muriel knew the name to be approved in the right quarter.

"After all, this cottage has forest rights," remarked Michael. "We can turn Esmerelda out to find much of his—her—own provender. She'll do herself proud in the pannage months. I only wish I knew what Mrs. Hobbs is going to say about it."

Mrs. Hobbs's cooking really had proved the divine thing.

Muriel's voice sounded a little flat as she said, "Perhaps we can hide her—at first."

Mick shook his head.

"No bushels for Esmerelda. One sees it in her eye. She regards the full blaze of publicity as her right."

"I shall hide her for to-day, at any rate," insisted Muriel. "Mrs. Hobbs was horribly cross this morning."

"Oh, she can't often find the whisky now."

Muriel curled herself up on the broad, low window-seat, and Esmerelda heaved herself upon its comfortable cushions and laid an artful snout on her mistress's knee.

"Is n't she a darling, Mick?"

"Why does n't that woman come and clear

away? I do hate food left on the table when one has to remain in the room."

"If she does n't come soon, I 'll do it," answered Muriel quickly. "When you return you 'll find all tidy."

She ran up-stairs for her sewing as she spoke, and though she was only gone some few minutes, returned to find the table had been cleared,—in one sense of the word,—though not by Mrs. Hobbs.

"Oh Esmerelda! And that pie was to do for our supper!"

Esmerelda grunted disdainfully.

"As long as Mick does n't know." The young wife hurriedly washed up and put the things away, and her husband returned a moment later. It had been rather a near thing.

"Good domestic angel," he said approvingly. "The pie put away safely, eh?"

"Oh yes," said Muriel, casting a reproachful glance at the pet pig.

"Mrs. Hobbs is a champion at pies! Enough for supper?" He opened the cupboard door as he spoke.

"How can you speak of one meal the moment you 've finished another!"

But Mick was hunting anxiously for signs of his beloved pie.

"The *devil!*" he exclaimed, "it 's gone!" He stared at his wife and then his eyes fell on the complacent Esmerelda. "You 've given it to that brute!"

"You can't keep a pig and *starve* it."

"I'll starve it sooner than feed it on Mrs. Hobbs's masterpieces," he retorted brutally. "There'll be pig-food in for the beast to-morrow and if it is n't good enough for her . . . we'll see about bacon. Is Mrs. Hobbs coming to cook something else to-night or did she calculate on the pie lasting?"

"I think she calculated on the pie," returned Muriel apologetically.

"I thought so!" And he slammed the door after him as he departed to the farm to buy food for Esmerelda.

She refused it at first, but the words "bacon" and "butcher" brought her to her senses, or so Mick affected to believe, though Muriel said it was the pangs of hunger.

"After all, it's easier to manage a pig than a char-lady," said Mick as the beast gobbled its food in the back kitchen, "and if we'll have to keep pies away it's not so trying as always finding a fresh place for the whisky. The ingenuity of the woman! She found it in the coal-box, and screwed the lid off my portmanteau, but she has n't thought to look under my mattress. I counted on her making the beds without turning 'em. But what practice she must have had to be so skilful at the game!"

"Oh, your whisky will be all right," said Muriel impatiently, "only you do fuss so about it!"

"Considering I cannot get my special brand of

Irish which is the only whisky I like, nearer than Totton," he began hotly, "it gives me something to fuss about!"

It was late when Mrs. Hobbs arrived. Esmerelda lay without protest under the table, hidden by the long cloth. She always seemed to understand what was expected of her; it was never lack of *understanding* with Esmerelda

Mrs. Hobbs, who came and went entirely at her own convenience, greeted those dependent on her ministrations rather coldly, cast a glance of withering scorn at the successful whisky-hider, and then taking up a duster proceeded to go into all manner of odd inconsequent places.

"Now she 's dusting the bread," said Mick, aghast, glad he had finally decided that the bread-bin was scarcely secure, "and the inside of my river-waders."

The river-waders had yielded much profit before now, but this time the industrious charwoman drew blank. After dusting the inside of the grandfather clock, Mrs. Hobbs snatched Muriel's hot-water bottle off the hob with a look of contempt, and proceeded majestically up-stairs.

"I do think it 's selfish of you to have a hot-water bottle," complained Mick, grinning. "It adds so to the risk of discovery. Suppose she forgets and puts it in my bed and finds a nubble under the mattress! Suppose her conscience pricks her belatedly and she turns the mattresses, mine in particular! I wish I had the courage to go up and

sit carelessly on my bed. But she takes all the spirit out of me. If I saw her take it, I should n't have the nerve to do anything. I should have to pretend not to notice! Oh . . . bother!"

"You make 'bother' sound so wicked," complained Muriel. "And here 's Esmerelda coming out! Do push her back!"

Esmerelda was pushed—rather roughly—into seclusion, and then Mick slunk shamefacedly up-stairs.

He found Mrs. Hobbs looking thoughtful, and tenderly smoothing his pillows with a somewhat grimy duster, and he longed to have the power to see with magic eyes into the depths of her deep pockets. He subsided on to his bed, but no nubble comforted him.

"Have you turned the mattress?" rose panic-stricken to his lips, but he met that cold stern eye and his courage failed. He hung his head, the picture of a culprit detected in the act, and changed it instead to "Have you . . . seen my shaving brushes?"

Mrs. Hobbs, appallingly respectable, looked him up and down with grim disapproval. "You 'll find them in your dressing-room, Mr. Talbot . . . *when* you 'ave a use for them. Ho yus!"

"Thank you," he said abjectly.

"Good-night," said Mrs. Hobbs haughtily, as with a curt bow she left the room. "Shiving brushes at this time o' night!"

Mick heard the outer door slam after her as he

sought feverishly for his treasure trove. Muriel came running up at the sound of violent profanity.

"She 's turned it!" he said dramatically.

"Well, it can't be helped now," said his wife, taking his misfortune with admirable fortitude. "Come and share my tea."

He refused, however, to share her tea, and glowered on the window-seat instead. As he sat nursing his grievance, he quite forgot his life was blighted because of Muriel whom he had married, and the Elf whom he could not. He only remembered Mrs. Hobbs had turned the mattress.

"The b——d officious old *cow!*" burst from him.

"Mick!" His wife sprang indignantly to her feet. "How can you use such vile, disgusting language!"

"It 's nothing to what I *could* use!"

"I shall go to bed, and it 's absurd to make such a fuss about a little whisky!"

"The bottle was practically full!"

Muriel was too busy trying to make Esmerelda understand she was not to follow her up-stairs to notice what her husband was saying. The disconsolate man and pig were left together, and sulked in company.

Mick lay awake trying to think of fresh hiding places and was just dozing off to sleep when lumping noises came up the stairs, and Esmerelda settled herself with a low contented grunt against the door.

Muriel woke with a start and sat up excitedly.

"Oh Mick, I *told* you she was n't an ordinary pig at all!"

"Bother the beast! The worst of it is she 'll be pretty tight to-morrow and not come near us——"

"Esmerelda never——"

"I was talking about Mrs. Hobbs," he shouted indignantly across the room at her. "Really, Muriel, you seem to have but one idea in your head—and that, that infernal self-seeking swine——"

"As far as that goes, *your* sole idea is Mrs. Hobbs and the whisky," returned the goaded Muriel, "and I daresay she 'll take most of it in bed to-night and be all right by supper-time to-morrow."

Mrs. Hobbs appeared about six o'clock on the following evening, very rigid, her head very high, and her wandering eye somewhat bloodshot and uncertain in its career; the other eye, however, was more than usually grim and respectable. It quelled Mick at once. He *had* meant to speak about his loss.

Esmerelda was disposed of under the table and forbidden to appear at the cost of hideous penalties.

Mrs. Hobbs unfroze after a while: she even smiled at Mick. "I 've thought of roast duck an' apple tart with cloves for to-night," she announced.

He eyed her gratefully.

"I dislike cloves," said Muriel.

"Married women have to be in subjection," returned Mrs. Hobbs, with the pious resignation

of a widow that had never been anything of the sort. "*Ho yus!*"

"Listen to pearls of wisdom, Muriel," cried Mick gaily, "and remember you 've left it to me, partner, and I 've made it cloves!"

He eyed the skilful whisky-finder in friendliest fashion. There was a fresh bottle in the sleeve of Muriel's new blouse (of which even Muriel knew nothing), and he had bought a flask which he intended to keep filled in his pocket, so that the utmost cunning of Mrs. Hobbs could not leave him comfortless.

"Strange 'ow 'usbands and wives is alwiys hopposites," remarked Mrs. Hobbs conversationally. "Now me and my 'usband were that hopposite you never did! Ho yus! He were hopposite somethink cruel! A little feller with bow legs, me own bein' stright as any dook's, and not what you 'd name for powerful though convenient for 'is profession which was chimbleys. 'E 'ad n't no looks, nor no brains, nor no intellec'—'e did n't even know one toon from another, and tikin' me and a lidy friend out one diy 'e disgriced the two of us somethink awful by standin' up an' tikin' off his 'at to 'I 'm afrid to go 'ome in the dark' instead of 'God Sive the King.' Not that 'e *were* afrid to come 'ome in the dark neither—'e preferred it, made it 'is 'abit for twenty years. I tried to get 'im sived more'n once but he never would come—'e were hopposite about religion too, 'avin' none to tike 'old of. 'E were n't much to

look at in life, but 'e did me proud as a corpse: everybody owned that as a body 'e were a fair treat. It 's coorious to think I never knew 'is 'air was grey till 'e were laid hout. 'E mide a perfectly norrible hend," she added, with gusto, "somethink awful! I expect he 's wishin' now 'e 'd 'ave come alonger me to 'ave been converted. Ho yus! 'E——"

"We have had our own work to do all day," interrupted Muriel coldly, breaking in on reminiscences that did not interest, merely disgusted, her.

"I was writin' to my nephy in America," explained Mrs. Hobbs, "him what married promiscuous a young 'ooman with a cork leg thinkin' it were naught but chilblains which she persuaded of 'im, but—Lor' Amighty . . .!" Her voice faltered, died away, for her horrified eyes had beheld a pig come from under the table. Even though she knew it could not be really there, it was the most realistic pig she had ever seen. She had once had what she called a touch of "influenzy," and what the tactless doctor called more than a touch of something else, warning her what she might expect, if she did not mend the error of her ways. She mended them by getting "converted" at intervals, and sporting a blue ribbon, at which times her work and cooking went utterly to pieces. She was a valiant soul, however, and not easily to be defeated, and to show that the doctor was entirely wrong and no gentleman, she proceeded

to walk through Esmerelda and prove her an illusion.

But Esmerelda unfortunately had ideas on the subject which were quite otherwise, being materialistic rather than spiritualistic, and the result was utterly disastrous.

While Mick helped up the panic-stricken charwoman, Muriel strove to soothe the outraged dignity of Esmerelda, who was very angry indeed, and did not care who knew it.

"'Oly 'Eaven!" gasped Mrs. Hobbs shrilly. "It 's a *live 'un!*"

Mick rather shamefacedly started to give a garbled version of Esmerelda's presence among them. "And the fact is—she won't go," he concluded feebly. "And she eats all the refuse and saves part of the washing up. We thought you 'd *rather* we had one."

His tones were rather agonised; he had a vanishing vision of roast duck and apple tart (with cloves).

"Am I to understand that it 's livin' 'ere along o' you and I 'm bein' requested to demean myself waitin' on a bloomin' swine?" demanded Mrs. Hobbs, in awful tones, reaching for her bonnet of many colours.

"Oh, *no—we* wait on Esmerelda!" declared the abject Mick.

"The *which?*" gasped the char-lady. "Young feller, you 're drunk!"

This was more than Muriel could endure. Rashly she entered the arena.

"How dare you speak in such a manner to my husband?" she demanded. "How dare you accuse him of drinking, when all the time——"

"Oh, Muriel, *don't*!"

"When all the time," repeated the young wife inexorably, "he does n't get a *chance*."

Mick giggled foolishly, but fell on gravity quickly enough as the divine cook's eye pierced into the recesses of his being.

"And the whisky missing again yesterday," went on Muriel, "nearly a whole bottle . . . taken out of his bed."

"And does a decent feller take whisky to bed with 'im?" demanded Mrs. Hobbs. "Disgustin' —worse 'n pigs any diy. No wonder 'e 's tiken one to live alonger 'im—the only company 'e 's likely to 'ave. Ho yus! Bottles of whisky in bed! When a young feller gets that 'abit, and gets it that bad, we all know what it leads to, not but what it 's surprisin' considerin' 'is tride which is what no God-fearin' man would tike up with for 'undreds of pounds which they never get, always bein' in debt and lyin' about money *just* bein' due. Ho yus! I don't think!"

"Consider yourself dismissed!" came sharply from Muriel.

"Oh, *no*," gasped Mick. "I have the greatest respect for Mrs. Hobbs—the very greatest."

"I wish I could return the compliment, Mr. Talbot," returned the lady, somewhat mollified, "but truth is truth an' journalists is journalists!

I don't mind siyin' that Mrs. Talbot is a real lidy" (her eye wandered to the great Mr. Higgins), "an' God knows I pities her."

"*Rather!*" agreed Mick fervently. Every moment he grew hungrier.

"Maybe there 's hope for you yet, Mr. Talbot, but you just tike my advice and check the drink 'abit afore it 's too late. We all knows where it leads to. Ho yus!"

"We do indeed," agreed Mick, solemnly, staring hard at Esmerelda.

Esmerelda hoped it would not lead to her again, and said so in her own fashion, her grunts being most pointed.

"Mrs. Hobbs must not speak to you like that," whispered Muriel angrily to her husband. "Always talking like that about journalists, too! I will not have it. Besides, you 're an author; that 's different."

"Rather!" grinned Mick. "A journalist gets paid: an author does n't."

"Oh, Mick! And I thought you 'd be sure to make a lot of money when the book you 're writing now is out!"

"I should n't wonder if I did!" he admitted, chuckling to himself.

"If you 've got anythink what a decent married woman can 'ear, hout with it, please, Mr. Talbot. I don't 'old with whisperin'!" snorted the char-lady, beginning to wrap up the duck.

"I assure you I would not think of saying anything at all——"

"I've never been a risky sort of lidy, Mr. Talbot, though my 'air was yaller as a gal, and I 'd thank you to remember it. There 's them as 'as their week-hends in Paris, but I 've never been one of them. I don't hold with Paris."

"I assure you," said Mick softly, "that anything in the nature of a Past is the last thing anyone could associate with you. . . . What a charming duck! How clever you are at providing. But it 's a gift, like your cooking. We can't all be geniuses, I suppose, but you must make your li—lady friends very jealous. Now I 'll bet that duck and tart is better than any meal I ever had at the Savoy."

"And you won't lose your money, Mr. Talbot," said Mrs. Hobbs, smirking graciously. "As for them there Savoys what give theirselves such a hair, what are they, the chefs, but pore benighted foreigners, same as them we send missions hout to, and dessay not converted worth countin' after all."

"You 're right there!" Mick assured her promptly.

And the meal, if belated, was fit for a king.

CHAPTER VI

CONCERNING A LITERARY EVENT AND AN AUNT

ESMERELDA settled down wonderfully as time went on, proving clever at getting what she wanted, and very much devoted to Muriel, who spoiled her atrociously. Mick she tolerated as a necessary evil. It was Mick she very nearly killed owing to a habit neither of her owners could get her out of. Whenever either of them started to ride down the nasty little hill with its loose stones and piled ones at the side, Esmerelda, with a squeal of excitement, would rush and try and get her snout between the spokes of the machine, and it was in trying to avoid her that Mick landed heavily on the heap of stones at the side.

He was very angry and kicked the pig, which fled indignantly home.

"I like her gratitude, I do!" fumed the sufferer, trying to scrape the mud off his clothes. "I save her life at the expense of money and ridicule, and she tries to kill me—and might have succeeded, by Gad, if I 'd been a worse rider!"

"I 'll be sure to see she 's shut up in future before we start," said Muriel apologetically. "It really *is* dangerous."

"She 'll find it fatal if she does it again!" said Michael shortly. "Harrison would buy her and bacon her any day."

When they returned Muriel pounced on a bulky letter awaiting her and Mick lit his pipe and yawned, rather obviously bored. "The great Uncle William?" he enquired.

"No, Aunt Susan, and I don't see how we *can* refuse. Oh, dear! Do you remember her at the wedding?"

"There were such a lot of aunts."

"The short stout one. . . very stout?"

"Was she tea-spoons or a salt-cellar?"

"A tea-caddy."

"*With* tea?"

"Don't be silly! Of course not!"

"Then I don't think much of her. Was it silver or plated?"

"Plated," answered Muriel, biting her lips, "but——"

"Plated aunts and country-cottage uncles!" and he shook his head reproachfully at his wife. "I 'm afraid the heart of your aunt Susan was no more in the right place than her waist was! I remember thinking," he added musingly, "what funny-shaped relations I was marrying. What does she want, and is it serious?"

"She wants to come and stay, and when Aunt Susan wants things——

"Fortunately it 's impossible."

"But I 'm her god-child and favourite niece,

and . . . she 's two hundred a year of her own. She said once she did n't believe in splitting money up——"

"So you 're her possible heiress. Hurrah! Won't we go it just when you come into all that, —a motor-car or so, a house in Park Lane, and a grouse moor for me! In the meantime explain there 's no accommodation for living aunts!"

"You always try and make things more difficult," she complained peevishly. "You know how lonely it 's for me. I hate long tramps and there 's no one . . . . you 're always at your writing. We could get a chair-bed for your dressing-room, and you could dress in the bath-room——"

"The bath-room, lidy, *Ho yus!* Not the back-kitchen by any chance! That would be Low. Also what about Mrs. Hobbs? Of course *I* don't mind if *she* does n't, and it would only be what she 'd expect. 'Mrs. Hobbs and Mr. Talbot, At Home daily in the back-kitchen from 6 A.M. to 6.30, also 11 to 12 P.M. No flowers by request.'"

"You know how I hate that kind of 'jokes.' I suppose you call them jokes? Mrs. Hobbs can do without the back-kitchen for half an hour in the morning, and you know she never stays after ten at night: besides you get up so early, long before she appears."

"But she 'll appear if she 's not wanted to, and demand to be let into her own quarters at once. And you know how frightened I am of her already. She 'd be furious if I did n't let her in, and more

furious when I did. Really Muriel. . .! You the daughter of a clergyman and the niece of a personage like that!" he pointed impressively to where Mr. Higgins in his mayoral robes occupied the place of honour. "Why we 'd never be able to mention the back-kitchen without a blush, and explanations would be truly awful!"

"Do be quiet, you are never serious! She 'd cost nothing extra."

"Oh, of course, if she 's content to share with Esmerelda that puts a different complexion upon matters, but—won't Esmerelda be annoyed?"

"And insists on paying thirty shillings a week while she stays; she says it would cost her that at a farm,and she wants to be of help to me in my troub — in my new life," she added, a little confused.

"Your awful trouble being me," suggested Mick thoughtfully. "She 's escaped 'em, has n't she? One of the 'also-rans,' eh?"

"Hush, Mick! I shall be able to save pounds, for she wants to stay for some months, and look what that will mean towards the furnishing. She mentions you and your work too."

"Read out that bit," he begged solemnly. "It 's sure to do me good."

"Where is it? Oh, yes, here we are—'*I am so interested to hear Michael's "Woodland Essays" are to appear at once in book form. How exciting, is n't it? I shall be sure to get it out of the library and tell my friends to do so, even though animal stories are n't*

suitable for grown-ups—still I suppose easier to make up and practise for a start, and that he will do some real work later on. I was talking to the curate about it; he was awfully interested (he's a most literary man): and he said he thought once of being an author himself, but the serious work of life compelled him reluctantly to give up this pleasant form of recreation.'"

"Preferring to pursue an occupation that makes no strain on the intelligence!" snorted Mick, up in arms.

"Oh, *hush!* If you say such things before Aunt Susan——"

"You 'll lose the thirty shillings a week, and I, the company of Mrs. Hobbs during ablution-time."

"If you 're in a position to *despise* money!"—Muriel's chin went up.

"I merely despise it when in the unworthy possession of others," he returned lightly, saying nothing of fortune cast away and opportunities despised.

"And she hoped I 'd marry an earnest young man!"

"An earnest young man," he repeated blankly. "Tell her she can't come."

"Because you can't get on with your relations there's no reason why I should be estranged from mine."

"I 'm only estranged when close to them," he answered with a yawn. "When the seas do us divide I 'm quite attached to them, even God-bless

my Aunt Maria—not knowing she 'd a plated teaspoon up her sleeve for me, and that she 'd cry at my wedding and say how sad it was to think of a nice girl's life being spoilt——"

"We can get the chair-bed in Southampton. You said you were going in this week; Tuesday would do, surely? We could meet Aunt Susan and have the bed put in the train and brought up by the pig-cart."

"Then she did n't write to ask if she might come, but to say she was *coming?* Well, kismet." He shrugged his shoulders, then he undid his own parcel, and pushed a book across to his wife. "Here 's a copy of *Woodland Essays* for you," he said gently. "I got my copies to-day. I hope you 'll like it."

"Is it likely to bring in much money?" she asked, taking it up.

"I don't know," he answered, a little shortly. "I doubt it. I have already been paid as I told you."

"A hundred and fifty pounds is n't at all bad," she said encouragingly, "and it seems a lot for what it is, though the illustrations are lovely. I had no idea it was going to be as nice as that. Of course I shall read it, though I suppose it is really only meant for children."

"Of a larger growth," he retorted, "but there, it is hopeless! I hate most of it myself. It went wrong from the start." He paced up and down the room, his face set in lines of irritation.

"It 's nice for children to learn about animals," said Muriel soothingly.

"Children don't learn: they teach." He flung her an angry, odd look.

"Mick, dear, don't talk such nonsense: one would n't have governesses for them if that were the case."

Mick made no reply. Passionately he was wishing the Elf had not gone out of his life, nor Muriel come into it. He would have liked Miss Elphenstonne to read *Woodland Essays* and have a little understanding, a little compassion, for the ideals he had fallen so short of. At least they had been there. But he knew nothing of her save that her picture was to be exhibited in the Wayne Gallery later on.

Muriel, believing it her duty as a wife, struggled valiantly with the book, but could not help wishing it had a proper story in it and the usual "love interest." With the exception of Esmerelda, she did not like or in the least understand animals, and after she had read a little while began to feel she did not want to understand these. Mick glanced at her half-humorously. "Don't worry with it," he said kindly, at length. "I shall do better some day——"

Muriel however read on, her face appalled. She thought the writer gross when he dealt frankly, simply, cleanly, with elemental facts of animal life. Such natural-history facts, ought, she felt, to have been wrapped up carefully in silver paper.

Perhaps she preferred the silver paper to the facts —Nature was such a shocking old lady! It was bad to be offended: it was worse to be bored. Who would want to read a book like this? How was it going to make any money?

He saw the questions on her face and answered them. "No—I shan't get any more money from it; nobody will want to read it. I only wrote it because my passion for earth and nature and all things primitive got the better of me. I ought to have written some catch-penny thing instead, have remembered those who respect you," he glanced towards the photo, "as long as you make money out of your craft. I thought only of what I liked instead of making a cash result my basis. I have been a fool and a dreamer!" he laughed curtly, "and—a failure."

"Oh, no, Mick, not yet— A hundred and fifty pounds is a nice little sum, and the next time it will be a real book, not just essays, perhaps a novel—a proper grown-up novel that pays."

"What would you say to an *improper* grown-up novel? They pay, you know . . . sometimes?"

"I should n't like people to know my husband was that sort of author. It would make conversation so awkward. No nice-minded woman reads improper books. Father used to preach against the coarse tendency of the literature of the day."

"What a nice free advertisement for the coarse literature! I hope he mentioned it by name for the sake of the author, and sent them copies of his

sermon to publish! 'Banned by the Vicar,' you know—such a helpful title to a cunning little paragraph. So nice-minded women don't read improper novels! Funny how they sell, some of them—especially when you think of the countless nice-minded women! But of course you are right in one way, many don't order them at the libraries where they are known, but go to the expense of privately buying a copy elsewhere—which is rather better from the author's point of view!"

"I 'm sure they don't," declared Muriel positively. She had never done so herself.

On Tuesday they went into Southampton by an early train, bought the chair-bed, and wandered up and down the picturesque little town. Mick would have liked to go and see the ships but dared not trust himself. Would he be content with seeing, when the highway of the seas beckoned? He would keep out of the reach of temptation, and instead went into the shop of delicious chocolates close to the Bar, and came out with a couple of big boxes. One he handed to his wife, the other he started upon with the greed of a healthy schoolboy, careless of smart people from priceless yachts staring at him in surprise.

"Oh, don't eat them in the street—it 's so common!" begged Muriel. "Look at those people who passed. How they stared."

"Well, I stared back," he returned, unperturbed. "A jolly pretty woman. Here she is again!" and he popped another chocolate into his mouth and met

the eyes of the pretty woman, with a smile lurking in his own.

"Oh, Jack," said the woman to her husband, as they passed on, "did you notice that delightful-looking man? Such a personality—and such a wife! Impossible, you know, but he——"

"Oh, hang it, Jean, you are always catching the eyes of delightful men with impossible wives!" retorted her elderly husband, impatiently, as he hurried her along. "It 's a shocking habit!"

"Therefore delightful!" was the reply of the pretty woman. "And he was just the sort of man I could fall most terribly in love with!"

"Well, as we 're off to Cowes in half an hour you won't get the chance," was the grim retort of her lord and master.

Mick had forgotten his fair admirer before she had passed out of sight, and moved up High Street staring intently into all the bookshops. He was hoping to see *Woodland Essays* displayed therein; but there was no sign of *Woodland Essays* anywhere—only many copies of a novel of very different stamp.

When they returned to the station later in the day Mick met with fresh disappointment at the bookstalls. No *Woodland Essays* here though it was only a few miles into the heart of Woodland itself. As a matter of fact more than half the stall was covered with a pile of the book he had previously noticed. It was rather a noticeable pile. There were lurid colours and an illustration

of a tall thin female with a very big coronet—rather crooked and out of drawing—trying to kiss a very suburban-looking young man against his will. One wondered alike at her determination, and her taste, and looking inside the covers and discovering big print, a certain *risqué* and easily read style, one bought it in preference to soberer literature. A flaming poster advertised *The Doubtful Duchess* by "A Doubter," while a certain clever, pushful publisher stood as godfather. The rapid sale must have rejoiced the heart of publisher and author alike.

It seemed to fascinate Mick, and to possess a positively unholy interest for Muriel, whose eyes were drawn to its lurid attractions time after time.

"I wonder who 'The Doubter' is," she muttered, "another of them, I suppose?"

"Another of whom?"

"Oh, duchesses, and those sort of people."

"More likely one who has never seen a duchess!" he returned.

"Oh, no, Mick, I 'm sure it 's the real thing: it looks so like it." She turned a page eagerly as she spoke, and skimmed a line or two.

"Had n't you better come away before the man makes you buy it?" he suggested. "It looks improper to me, the sort of novel no nice-minded woman would think of reading—in public!"

Muriel clung to the book with itching fingers. "Such a title!" she cried. "I expect it 's quite

harmless. Besides people ought to learn about all sorts of society, don't you think?"

"Here 's the London train. Do you want Miss Dalton to find you with *The Doubtful Duchess* clasped to your bosom?"

She came reluctantly away, but when Mick left her to see about the chair-bed being put in the Totton train, she drifted back again. The clerk looked up, his face expressionless, and wrapped a copy of the lurid novel in a piece of brown paper. "We shan't have any left soon, madam," he said, "there 's been such a run on it! The first edition was sold in three days . . . . some say the title started it: no one knows who the author is, though," dropping his voice, "they have their suspicions," and he whispered the name of a certain young duchess.

Muriel slipped the parcel into the big pocket of her coat, and was looking entirely unconscious of its contents when Mick returned to her side.

Miss Dalton, a lady with the valiant type of waist that never gives in—or rather out—arrived, important and fussy, and liberally supplied with parcels. She kissed Muriel, told her she was looking older, but added vaguely she "supposed one did," and then turned to Mick. "I bought your book," she said patronisingly, "though I could have got it out of the library for tuppence. I am going to read it this week and then send it to my small nephew Tommy for his birthday. He is very interested in animals, and kills and catches

all the flies he can. I must say five shillings seems a lot to pay for a child's book, even though the illustrations *are* really charming. Does the author do those too, or is the publisher the illustrator? Anyway they simply *make* the book. The other people in the carriage agreed with me. I showed it them and asked them to look out for your *proper* book, not just essays, though of course quite nice for a start . . . that you were *my* nephew."

"What an inducement!" grinned Michael to himself, while he gazed in alarm at her very prominent and insecure-looking false teeth. He hoped they were safer than they looked, for he was not skilled in keeping his countenance, or hiding his feelings. Aloud he said humbly, "Yes, I 'm afraid *Woodland Essays is* rather dear at the price—in more senses than one."

"You can get a *real* novel for four-and-six," went on Miss Dalton, a trifle resentfully, as one who has been "done" by a relative—albeit only a relative by marriage, "a proper one for grown-ups." Her eyes were on a tray of *Doubtful Duchesses.*

"Even an improper one is no more—unless in your eagerness you buy it at a station for six shillings, and lose your discount," he remarked thoughtfully. He was standing close to Muriel's bulky pocket.

Muriel went pink. Still no doubt it was worth it! Surely if a duchess wrote it . . .! and one did not haggle with duchesses! She pushed it

deeper into her pocket. Mick must not know, he would laugh—he laughed at everything—and above all the susceptibilities of the rigid spinster aunt must be spared. Of course as a married woman she might now be permitted more catholic tastes. But Miss Dalton was *extremely* particular.

"Allow me to take your parcels," suggested Miss Dalton's nephew-in-law, without enthusiasm. "There 's just two minutes for the train."

The spinster surrendered all save a brown paper parcel to which she clung with passionate devotion. Mick's heart warmed suddenly to her, for the shape was the shape of his book. Then his mouth took its cynical curve: need he be flattered? Miss Dalton was merely keeping her "five shillings net" intact.

"I see you are keeping it clean," he said pleasantly.

Miss Dalton glared at him; her red face turned redder. "To what do you allude?" she demanded.

"Is n't it *Woodland Essays?*" Mick too went red and felt uncommonly foolish.

"It is not: it is merely a novel I bought for my own pleasure. I gave you your book to carry; it was with the Stilton cheese."

"I assure you you are mistaken: its absence is as obvious as the presence of the other."

"I have always been accustomed to the best cheese, and I did n't suppose you 'd get real Stilton in the wilds, so I brought one as a small offering. But I am sure the book was there as well."

"You had only the one you are carrying when you arrived."

"Then I must have left it in the train!" Miss Dalton cried, aggrieved, glaring at Mick as if he alone were to blame as author. "Tiresome thing! And I 've wasted five shillings—I shall have to give Tommy something else for his birthday."

"Send him an order for half-a-crown, then you will have saved two-and-six, and have earned the gratitude of Tommy," suggested Mick, with great gravity.

Her face cleared, but fell again, for on examination she found the theory hollow. "I shall have lost half-a-crown and five shillings!" she declared tragically.

"But Tommy at least will be a gainer."

"Now the guard will take it home to *his* children. How annoying!"

"I expect they 'll think so," he agreed, handing her into the Totton train and seeing to the safe disposal of her numerous parcels.

Miss Dalton and the chair-bed were fitted into the little dressing-room and the lady of independent means declared herself delighted with all she saw.

The cottage was so "quaint," and how "generous" it was of "dear William"! The trees budding into spring green were "perfectly sweet": even Esmerelda, who always made up to the powers that be, found favour in the sight of the gracious guest. She was so "original." Then Mrs. Hobbs excelled herself at supper and all went, as Mick re-

marked, "as merry as if there never had *been* any wedding-bells."

Going up late after hours of writing, Mick sleepily forgot all about the new occupant of his dressing-room, and had opened the door before he remembered that in future he must be more circumspect. He managed to shut it before Miss Dalton, sitting up in bed absorbed in *The Doubtful Duchess*, had time to see or hear anything. He leaned against the wall shaken with silent laughter. "And if she knew *I* was the 'Doubter' there 'd be the devil to pay!" he chuckled.

As he entered his own room, a candle was hastily blown out, and Muriel dropped on her pillows, feigning sleep.

But he had caught sight of a certain lurid cover, and as he lay in bed stifled his mirth as best he could. Every now and then he choked from under the pillow and his bed shook, but Muriel, genuinely asleep, was quite unconscious of his ribaldry.

CHAPTER VII

JARRING ELEMENTS

MICK TALBOT appeared for breakfast after his long morning ramble in what his wife mentally named "a mood."

"G'morning," he said curtly. "Where 's the fair guest? Is she going to keep us waiting for breakfast because she 's your godmother and has two hundred a year of her very own?"

"I took it up," said Muriel. "She does n't care to get up so early."

His face cleared. There was then to be one meal free of Miss Dalton's presence. Believing that to live with stupidity was to become stupid, Mick was not likely to "grow" in the company of Muriel and her aunt.

"Really, this little hole is too crowded for aunts!" he said irritably. "And she 's not even a slim one! If it were an aunt with a secret sorrow now, a mere shadow!"

"Poor Aunt Susan has a sorrow, a great sorrow," said Muriel, reprovingly. "I wish you were n't so flippant!"

For flippant he was, given to senseless vulgar

jokes, careless of convention, coarse. It was all mere exuberance, temperament, often sheer misery, but, of course, it would have been impossible to make Muriel realise that.

She could see that he was specially offensive this morning: but she could not guess the cause, the torment of unrest, of longing, that would not let the man alone.

"What 's her secret sorrow? Her waist—or lack of it?"

"Of course that is a *trial*, but not like the other. She was engaged once, and his ship went down at sea."

"A lucky escape—poor devil!" He dug viciously at the ham.

"He did n't escape, dear. He was drowned," returned Muriel, trying to be patient. Mick never "saw" things.

"What 's drowning?" asked her husband, with a shrug.

She flushed angrily. "They would have been very happy—when he 'd got accustomed to her."

"Such being marriage! Of course one always is. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to get accustomed though—and a bit beyond that again," he thought, with an inward groan. "Heaven help us both! Heaven helped him!" he added grimly, aloud.

"You say this sort of thing because she 's *my* relation! You 'd even make fun of Uncle William, and it is n't as if *you* had a rich relation."

The subtle could read a hint of reproach, of condescension, and Mick's bitter, mobile lips twisted.

"Rich relations make me think of peonies," he retorted; "rich and red, not to be overlooked, and needing a great deal of room. I 've always hated the pomposity of peonies, and even before I owned a rich relation—by marriage—they made me think of them."

Mr. Higgins had filled up the room at the wedding, in more senses than one.

"It 's over five hundred thousand pounds and he knows quite a lot of swell people."

"You mean the 'swell people' know the five hundred thousand pounds and ignore or tolerate the owner. But *only* five hundred thousand! I am disappointed. Thousands instead of millions. I knew a chap with twenty millions once—a miserable devil he was, too!"

"He is making more all the time, and there is talk of a peerage. He is very prominent in church and charitable circles."

"In training at any rate," laughed Mick, "if only in one sense of the word. Funny how money seems to fly to the stomach," he added gravely.

"*Mick!* How can you be so disgustingly vulgar!"

"It 's quite easy with custom," he returned, "though of course it 's shocking to talk like that of a live peer. Now, a stuffed one—of course, not in the sense that he *is* stuffed—would be different. I suppose one gets quite an adept at mentioning

him carelessly in converstion. 'Talking about cooks, there's my uncle, Lord Holocast, you know . . . .' and so forth."

Muriel bit her lips. "One does n't: it 's considered vulgar."

"But how are people to know you own a peer if you don't *tell* 'em?" he asked, in distressed tones.

"There are ways . . . you can safely leave that to me."

"I 'm sure I can. In the meanwhile, the honour is still to come. What a joke!"

"*A peerage a joke?*"

"Well, I always think the only way to carry off a new peerage gracefully is to pretend it 's a joke. It saves a lot if you do the laughing yourself."

"The laughing! You have the maddest ideas, Mick! I do hope you won't air them before Aunt Susan! We 've all been brought up with refined people."

"I suppose I *do* lack refinement," owned Mick. "I 'd never thought of it before, somehow."

"I wish you would begin to think of it now. It 's quite time if we are to get on socially, and of course this life is only for a short time."

"I sincerely hope so!" His grey eyes darkened. "Shall I take Mrs. Hobbs for my model?" he asked. "*She* is a real lidy. Ho yus!"

Something, almost a sniff, escaped Muriel. Really Mick was more than aggravating!

Gravely he handed her his handkerchief. "Only don't blow too loudly in the rich uncle's

cottage," he implored, "or, like Jericho, the walls may fall down, and who knows if Aunt Susan is prepared for such an *exposé*. One might even be in one's bath."

Muriel flung back the handkerchief, and glared at the tormentor.

"Once," he went on inconsequently, in the way her insensible conmon-sense could never follow, "I was in the wilds of Japan and requiring a bath ordered one at a geisha-house——"

"What were you doing in one of those dreadful places?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Trying to get a bath. After I had made the disappointed ladies understand they need not help or supervise——"

Muriel jumped to her feet. "That will do, Mick! Do you hear. That will do! I never know what you 're going to say next!"

"Would you rather I said it next to Aunt Susan?" asked the irritating creature. "I thought you ought to know. You 're my wife, and it 's one of my mad, bad pasts. *Somebody* must know what a naughty boy I was . . .!" He wept imaginary tears of repentance over the table-cloth.

"Very well, go on." And she set her lips. It was all very well to read about *risqué* episodes in the career of *The Doubtful Duchess*, but it was a very different matter to hear about such episodes in the career of the man she had married, and from his own unrepentant, mocking lips! He was not "nice." If there "had been things," men pre-

tended there had n't or ignored them when they were married to "nice" wives. But what had Mick ever the decency to ignore?

"Well, I *had* my bath, a leisurely bath," he continued, "and after I had dressed, also in the most leisurely fashion, I discovered five little holes poked through the paper walls, and five little, bright, interested eyes. . . . I was the first Englishman they had seen, but was foolish enough to feel hideously embarrassed, instead of realising that, because it was nothing to them, it could be nothing to me."

"Things like that don't happen to *nice* people!" exclaimed the shocked wife. "You seem to have travelled in a most *peculiar* way."

"Well . . . not via discreet Mr. Cook," owned the culprit. "I like to get down to bed-rock. The usual tourist never sees the life of strange countries at all. He sees shows faked for his seeing and—other tourists. And other tourists are often what he prefers, and about the only thing he understands."

"I shall travel with Mr. Cook if ever I——"

Mick held up a horrified admonishing hand. "What—my immaculate Muriel! But I shall divorce you just the same," and added quickly with a grin:

"She took 'er 'ook
With Mister Cook,
To go and look
For a shy nook.

But her husband he was snorty,
He made her *une divorcée*,
And now that erstwhile lidy
Is considered somewhat shidy
And is 'beached' upon the shores of Cook-her-Took!

Done on the spot, and full of genuine passion and poetry!"

"How you *can!*" cried Muriel, making for the door.

"Ah! . . . you can't learn it, it 's a gift. Shall I do some more?"

But Muriel was already stumbling up the dark stairs to her aunt's room, wondering if ever woman had been so tried before. It was possible that in the world there was even a woman who could be happy with Mick and he with her. But God had given him her—and her him, and—her mouth twisted peevishly—she had been taught to believe in His good purpose. It was not easy—and it was so very little better than not marrying at all!

"Ah," said Miss Dalton, after one glance at her face. "I said so from the beginning. I felt sure he was that kind of a husband!"

Muriel burst into the bitter tears of disillusion. "If only he were n't so—so dreadful!" she sobbed.

"Do you mean shocking?" Miss Dalton was all interested alertness. "Tell me about it! It will make you feel better."

"He *says* such things!"

Perhaps a brief flash of disappointment passed

over Miss Dalton's face. She wanted her niece to be happy, but she did not want her to keep drama to herself.

"He makes fun of all I 've been brought up to hold sacred," sobbed Muriel incoherently. "Money, and Uncle William, and peerages, and God——"

"Makes *fun?*"

"I know—it sounds impossible, but he *does!* He 's never serious about serious things, never! And he jests about morality too, and getting on in the world, and religion, and refinement, and social distinctions . . . and, oh! everything! I suppose it 's the artistic temperament——"

Miss Dalton snorted indignantly. "The artistic temperament! Oh, I know all about it. I warned you of that, too, you may remember?"

Muriel did—not without resentment. After all, Michael was *her* husband, and could be very nice at times.

"They call it that when they steal money or borrow it, or are unfaithful to their wives," went on Miss Dalton, as one who knew. "It must be very convenient for them; writers always have it and think they have n't—or have n't it, and think they have. But they always know about other people. It 's part of the—the——"

"Disease?" asked Muriel shortly.

"Environment is a better word. If Mick has got it, now is the time to put an end to it. It just wants firmness and self-control. Always begin

on a man the minute you are married, or it may be too late afterwards. You must persevere, dear."

Muriel's face set in heavy, sullen lines. "I 've done my best, but you don't know Mick. He is terribly difficult and—and elusive. And though of course he is very fond of me, yet he 's not actually *in love*, if you know what I mean."

"You 've been married six months," said the spinster, struggling with her waist-belt.

"Think of the Hemnies. They 'd been married six years, and he idolised her!"

"I never approved of Mrs. Hemnies," said Miss Dalton. "Besides, she was odd. They were both odd; not quite nice, I often thought." And thus in a few words were a charming, brilliant, and devoted couple disposed of. They really were unusual, consequently "odd" and "not quite nice."

"She was n't very pretty, and said such *queer* things," complained Muriel, "but he always seemed so proud of her—quite like a lover!"

"Very bad taste," frowned Miss Dalton, who had dimly felt another meaning behind the elusive speeches of the fascinating and witty Mrs. Hemnies. "I should be sorry to see a niece of mine attracting everybody's attention the way she did, and having a crowd always round her! But surely in six months you ought to have influenced Mick more. His mouth is as unpleasantly primitive-looking as ever. Really it is not gentlemanly to have a mouth like that! How much money has he made? That tiresome book that I lost, now? Did he get

anything for it, if he did n't do the illustrations? It *does* seem silly of an author not to be able to do his own illustrations. He should learn without loss of time."

"He got ten pounds a week for each of the essays, which came to a hundred pounds, and fifty pounds for the copyright of the book. That is, a hundred and fifty pounds so far, but he does not expect anything more."

"I should think not indeed!" gasped Miss Dalton, who considered he had been outrageously over-paid. "Fancy a hundred and fifty pounds for a thing like that—so small I mean," she added hastily. "And not even a grown-up novel! Oh dear, it *is* annoying! I left it in the train! I might as well have kept the money in my pocket. How long did it take him to do?"

"Three months."

"Then what has he been doing with the other three months? Not idling, I trust, when he can make six hundred pounds a year at a simple thing like that! These writing people have no business instincts. I always said so."

Mick was, however, the first of the fraternity she had ever spoken to.

"He has n't been wasting time." The young wife bridled a little. "Ever since we came he 's been at another book—though he has n't said anything to me about it."

"Why not? Is it anything to be ashamed of? I hope he is n't writing any of the wicked, improper

stuff one hears about. A nephew of mine—it would be dreadful!"

"Oh, he would n't *think* of such a thing!" Muriel hastened to assure the alarmed spinster.

"He ought to sell a book every three months, then you could see where you were, and it 's your duty to keep him to it, Muriel."

"He says you can't go on at that rate, that you get stale, must have a good rest——"

"Ah . . . lazy! Like the rest of them. But he 's a married man with responsibilities. What 's the name of the new book?"

"He says it is n't in my line." She stooped to pick up a pin. Though incapable of understanding, she was not incapable of resentment at the secrecy he maintained.

They were in the living-room and Mick entered as she spoke, and greeted his relative courteously enough.

"What 's the name of the book you 're writing now?" Muriel demanded of her husband.

"*Pagan People*," he said shortly after a moment's hesitation.

"*What* people!" broke in Miss Dalton. "You do not mean anything anti-Church, I suppose? That would be too frightful. Never forget you have married a clergyman's daughter, Michael!"

"I' m not likely to," he retorted.

"I am glad to hear that. Does the hero marry the heroine?"

"There is n't a heroine," he returned desperately.

"It 's just pieces of vagrant life, bits of my own experiences, things I am doing for my own pleasure as much as anything else."

"Do you consider you have a right to waste your time on your own pleasure now you are a married man? Is n't it your duty and your business to write for profit?"

Mick rubbed his chin without answering. He was thinking what dreadful people his wife 's relations were, and yet they were so eminently suited to his wife. One could not, indeed, "place" her with any other.

"Sometimes pleasure and profit are combined," he said, at length, ere making his escape. Two intolerable women to be borne with now!

Miss Dalton frowned. "I was afraid of it, Muriel, but we must hope for the best, and of course you must make him change the title. That would never sell a book, and only put nice people off it. Have you read *The Only Man She Ever Loved?* That 's the sort of title I mean: it shows people at once what to expect."

"There was one on the station, called *The Doubtful Duchess*, by a society duchess," said Muriel slowly. "That sort of title tells too. Everybody was buying it."

"Ah . . . !" said Miss Dalton, and bent over her knitting.

"I suppose from what one sees in the papers, it is *rather* . . . " went on the younger woman. "How it has sold! Mick says nice-minded women

buy that sort of books to take to bed with them."

Miss Dalton dropped a stitch. "I do not like your husband's ideas: please do not quote him to me. When he 's a famous author—*if* he ever is—that sort of thing may be thought smart. *I* consider it rude. From all accounts the book is outrageous, especially in parts . . ." (She had every right to say so, having read these selfsame "parts" several times.) "Some people think it funny, I suppose. Of course Society is rotten and like that. Anyway, the writer being who she is, would know. I suppose the 'Doubtful Duchess' is herself."

"There 's a fourth edition advertised in to-day's paper," said Muriel.

"Then of course it must be good—of its kind," said Miss Dalton, struggling with her knitting. "O dear, here 's Mick again; what does he want now?"

He wanted the newspaper—and he, too, ran his eye down the list of publishers' advertisements and looked relieved. He wanted to commit an extravagance—and believed himself justified.

He flung the paper impatiently from him, hating his own facile success, and sighed dispiritedly, as he gazed out into the space of moorland, forgetting the very existence of the two women whose eyes were fastened on his gloomy face. He was not smiling or jesting now: he was just craving fiercely, desperately, for the girl he had named the Elf, and for freedom.

"We are made men and women, and then punished because we don't act like angels," he muttered resentfully to himself. "And it is not even logic."

He stared, with eyes that saw nothing, at the perfect scene before him, at the tints of the distant trees—purple and crimson and grey light piercing the darkness, and gold sparkling in the blackest depths. Well, the golden cup was empty, but there was still his work, by which he did not mean anything of *The Doubtful Duchess* nature. He would go on, though the savour was gone, because it was worse to stand still.

Miss Dalton's rather harsh voice broke upon his musings.

"I suppose you have the artistic temperament?" it said.

"Oh, yes . . . yes, just so," he answered absently, bringing himself back to realities with an effort. "The artistic temperament—of course. Have you any objection?" He raised his fierce, black brows at her.

"I consider it your duty to check it now you are a married man," she said gravely. "A habit chronically indulged becomes a vice. You should give it up, before it is too late." She smiled on him encouragingly.

He stared, then up went the corners of his mouth and the room echoed to his joyous, delightful laughter.

"I don't see anything to laugh at." Miss Dalton

stiffened. "The curate said his sister used to have it, but when she got married and had twins she had n't any time, and gave it up."

"I see." He struggled for gravity. "Of course she would n't have time. Nobody would." He nodded his head gravely. "The inartistic conclusion is only too horribly inevitable. One just has twins and has n't any time. May I offer the cure to some of my poor afflicted literary friends? I 'm sure they would n't consider the remedy worse than the disease. Could I hire twins myself till I was cured?"

"I do not consider it a fit subject for jest!" Miss Dalton's tones were ominous.

"I quite agree with you. But there 's one aspect we 've overlooked—that though the twins would certainly cure the artistic temperament, yet would the artistic temperament produce twins? Somehow, I cannot believe it."

"That, of course, is not a subject I could discuss with you," said Miss Dalton, aghast, fearing some "improper" reference to the matter.

He nodded a head in grave agreement. "It scarcely bears talking about at all," he said, making his escape.

"He will never be cured," announced Miss Dalton. "I can see it in his eyes. How wild they are, not quite gentlemanly, either."

"He will grow out of it," said Muriel, more hopefully. "And he has some really nice qualities. Please do not run him down, Aunt Susan. He

wants tact and understanding, that is all. He is clever too—in his way. Of course he is not as refined as I could wish or *really* gentlemanly, but there 's always something. One learns that as soon as one is married. He 's going to be well off and have a good position. Of course he is too fond of nature, but he will grow out of that, too, and realise it 's rather common."

"If you want to have nice friends and a nice circle," said Miss Dalton grimly, "you 'd better let Michael see that the sooner he leaves nature alone the better. We all know what it leads to. And it 's *always* so disgusting!"

In which sentiment Muriel agreed. Nature was one of the things all refined people ignored.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLESSING IN DISGUISE

IT was an agreeable surprise to find that, as time went on, Miss Dalton was to prove a blessing in disguise. Muriel had much more in common with her aunt than with her husband. In fact, the two ladies were most companionable; so that Mick was left entirely free.

He could wander, like the vagabond he was, all over the forest, making out-of-the-way acquaintances, studying the life intimately, and writing *Pagan People*, which was gradually absorbing him. He was alternately pleased or disgusted with his work, as the mood took him. If only there were someone he could talk it over with! If only the Elf's elusive face had not flown beyond his ken, as such elusive elves have a way of doing! How often he went back to their odd three weeks' isolation and fast friendship! Where was she now—his fellow vagabond?

He was going to the Wayne Gallery the day it opened, to see, and, if possible, buy her picture, and find perhaps trace of her whereabouts. There would at least be no reason why he should not write.

With the summer came money and notoriety—of a kind—to Michael Talbot. Fifty thousand copies of *The Doubtful Duchess*, published at the end of March, had been sold. He had made two thousand pounds and a reputation he would have been glad to dispense with. He was overwhelmed with offers for another novel of the same stamp, but declined to make any arrangements. His curious fate had held, and he had made money almost inadvertently, only to be ashamed of his achievement. It was so very easy and so very "cheap." His book had sold, not because it had any literary value, or was in the least true to life, but merely because it was farcically *risqué*. The public, which did not want his better efforts, clamoured for more "Doubtful Duchesses," and were prepared to pay for their fancy. Since money must be his aim if he were to keep his promise to Muriel, he almost decided to carry on the double identity. He knew of several successful instances.

In the meanwhile, he remembered a mining magnate who was always urging him to "make a bit," and sent a hurried scrawl to him with a cheque for fifteen hundred pounds, and an injunction that the friend would "make me or break me." His friend wrote and said what shares he had bought with the money and the possible result to be anticipated, and Mick thought no more about the matter till a cheque for six thousand pounds reached him. This money Mick actually invested in

sound securities, feeling horribly depressed with the weight of his sanity. Of course he knew he ought to tell Muriel of his good fortune, if not exactly how he had achieved it, but he hesitated. She would select the desirable suburb, and the desirable villa, and Mick determined to put off that evil day as long as possible. He had grown to care for the forest, to find a wild wandering existence possible there; and the future, as mapped out by Muriel, assumed more and more fearful proportions. He would put off the evil day a little longer: it was not really wronging her, for it would mean more money in the end.

He did, however, tell her that he had been "lucky in a speculation advised by a safe friend," and that by the end of the year she might be able to realise her heart's desire, and start really comfortably. And he handed her a valuable diamond pendant.

Miss Dalton at once told the young wife what the habit of speculation led to, and what she would have to expect in the barren future.

"They always get into the workhouse or—the dock," she said.

"But sometimes into Society," said the more optimistic Muriel. "If Mick makes money like this, and so easily, he 'll be able to invest it and have an income! It may mean Wimbledon or Kensington."

"Or destitution," added Miss Dalton, grimly. "How can he make a fortune without capital,

without embezzling? Then he 's so eccentric and erratic—he 'd be sure to be found out!"

"Uncle William started without capital—and look where he is now!"

"That is different. Dear William is a financial genius—Michael an author, and they *never* have any business instincts. They would n't be authors if they had. And William had saved a little capital, and married more. Jane would never have been Mrs. Higgins but for that—or Mrs. anything!" And Miss Dalton's lips closed rather unpleasantly. She had admired her brother's brother-in-law herself, but her modest fortune had been insufficient. The honour she had achieved seemed almost wasted on Jane Higgins, who scarcely appeared to realise her great luck. But then, "poor Jane" was rather stupid—William himself had indulgently hinted as much. To Mr. Higgins all women were more or less stupid: the very fact of their *being* women proved it.

It is to be feared Mick got rather more amusement than was kind or chivalrous out of Miss Dalton and Mrs. Hobbs. For the latter, however, he retained a wholesome awe: if he offended her, he lost perfectly cooked meals, and though not a sybarite, that sort of thing counted with Michael Talbot so long as he had to endure civilisation. In the wilds he could live contentedly on anything or practically nothing, but marriage, and Muriel, required compensating circumstances. He thought of Miss Dalton in the light of a farcical

character. No one could caricature her: she was already a caricature. Neither could they exaggerate, for nature had exaggerated so broadly in making her, no further invention was required. She was a type, more than an individual. Often, she provided the humour of situations otherwise intolerable, and one day she did more than this, she became a screaming and vulgar farce.

The women were out, had gone for a leisurely bicycle ride, and Mick was busy writing alone in the cottage, when he was disturbed by Muriel, white and terrified, dashing up to him.

"Mick! She 's stuck in a bog—be quick!" she gasped, panting.

"Well, what did you take her for?" demanded Mick, looking unwillingly up from his work. "She 's been nothing but an expense and an annoyance from the day she came."

"But she 'll die——"

"Serve her right! Why could n't she die quietly to start with! She 's for ever in mischief. Still, five pounds is five pounds, these money-grasping days!" He rose, still grumbling, to his feet.

"It 's *Aunt Susan!*" screamed Muriel.

He sat down again with a distinct air of relief, and took up his pen.

"I thought you meant Esmerelda. Tell her to walk out of the bog and not play the heroine-rescued-by-the-handsome-hero-act—because there are n't any, except Harrison of the pig farm, and even his admiration is vague."

He did not know of any bog in the direction they had taken, nor for a moment believe Miss Dalton to be in any danger, and he was in the midst of an absorbing chapter.

"She was over her boots in a moment!" cried Muriel, pulling at his arm.

"Then let her take them off."

"And up to her *waist* when I left," screamed the young wife, wringing her hands. "Oh, why *won't* you understand? She 's dying by inches—inches!"

"*What!*" he gasped, his consternation and concern genuine enough. "Good God, Muriel, why did n't you tell me at once instead of wasting valuable time like this!"

He dashed into the back-kitchen while he spoke, giving Muriel no time for the obvious retort, and came out with his bicycle and the clothes line. "Go on ahead and show me the way," he said curtly.

On a wild portion of the moor, in a genuine bog enough as far as one could see, sunk to the waist he had cruelly declared non-existent, Mick saw the short fat form of Miss Dalton.

Poor lady, that at such a moment she must look comic rather than tragic! That Mick should want to laugh even now!

Esmerelda, who accompanied them valiantly on their short slow-paced rides, was seated on firm ground not far from the victim, watching her with a disapproving eye. "Whatever are you doing that for?" she seemed to say plainly as ever pig

spoke. "Don't you know it 's very unladylike and is n't 'done' in the best circles?"

But Miss Dalton went on doing it all the same.

"Hi!" cried Mick sharply, "hi—*you!*" and he struck the animal sharply with the end of the rope. "Get along you beast!"

"Oh, you 'll get her bogged, *too!*" wailed Muriel, clinging to him and hindering his efforts.

"She 's too jolly selfish to let me! I 'm going to drive her in front to test the ground; she 'll pick her way clear, will Esmerelda!"

Furious and protesting, the pig was forced towards the danger zone.

"It 's all right," cried Mick, relieved, as he let the squealing animal fly back to safety and Muriel. "The bog is only a couple of yards in circumference —we 'll soon have her out!"

He flung a looped end of rope to the gasping Miss Dalton. "Put it under your arms," he commanded, "hold fast, and—look out!"

"Oh, Mick, you 'll lasso her!" shrieked Muriel. "She 'll be hung if it gets round her neck!"

"How is it going to get round her neck? There, it 's under her arms. Now stand clear, I 'm going to pull her out. I daresay it 'll mean a bit of a tug." He prepared to exert all his strength. His experiences had been many, but he had never rescued a bogged person before.

The weeping Muriel stood clear, and Mick, setting his feet against a mound, pulled with all his vast strength. He was ready to admit afterwards

that perhaps less strength might have sufficed—that he might have saved Miss Dalton's dignity as well as Miss Dalton. However, he meant well and he saved the victim from death. She came out of danger without any hesitation whatsoever: made unseemly haste over it. There was a sucking sound, the rending of a garment, and she shot as if from a catapult towards her rescuer—face downwards across the bog.

Mick gave one glance at the rescued, then dropped the rope and fell helplessly against Muriel. "I *told* you," he said triumphantly, "that Aunt Susan was a funny shape! And she *is!*"

The unhappy lady had left her skirt behind her as the price of liberty, and lay revealed, black, but far from comely, in very tight cycling knickers.

"Hush—she 'll hear! Oh, Mick, how awfully unfortunate. She 'll be so *dreadfully* angry!"

"Angry—when I 've saved her life! I thought she 'd give me a thousand-pound note or motor-car at the least. Won't she even give me her blessing?"

"You should not have pulled so hard—you *always* overdo everything!"

"I did n't mean to exaggerate so much," he said humbly, "but if I had n't pulled at all it would be worse—worse for her, I mean. *You 'd* be a lady with a private income—and without funeral expenses."

"You are perfectly sickening—and she 's getting up."

"Then she can thank me some other time," said Mick hastily, and making a dash for his bicycle, disappeared.

The climax of the comic situation had passed: it was time for the curtain to go down to loud laughter. How it would amuse . . . the gallery!

Miss Dalton, black from head to feet with oily mud, came shrinkingly forward.

"Oh, I know what Eve felt like now!" she said, beginning to cry.

"But there is n't any Adam," said Muriel consolingly.

"Nor any fig-leaves," retorted Miss Dalton. "Eve made a proper dress at once, but what I 'm to do to get home I can't think! And across the moors too—so conspicuous!"

"But lonely," hastily interposed the younger woman. "One hardly ever meets a soul."

"Hardly ever is n't *never*," was the sharp reply, "and there are always wretched tourists on bicycles popping up when you least expect them!" Mortified tears made two clean channels down the unhappy lady's grimed face. "They will think I 'm a harem-skirt woman or some dreadfully unsexed creature, not a real lady at all! He nearly pulled me in two . . . I always knew he was a brute . . . a man with eyes like that, and such a mouth! I thought I heard him laugh too."

"Oh, no—not *laugh*," lied Muriel hurriedly. "You know he would never do that. Aunt Susan . . . and he saved your life."

"In a way to make me publicly ridiculous and indecent! If there were policemen in the Forest I suppose I should get taken up: then it would be in the papers and your father would see it. 'Clergyman's sister and daughter fined for indecency,' or something like that—big letters so that people did n't miss it! I shall never be able to hold up my head again. Look at me, I say *look* at me," her voice rose hysterically, "and tell me how I 'm to get home without open disgrace, if you can!"

Muriel, looking at the open stretch of moors around them, felt the problem was beyond her, but timidly pointed out a bush in the distance which, though adequate enough shelter for a rabbit, could prove of little advantage to Miss Dalton. "Could you hide behind that till I rode home and brought back a skirt?"

"You *know* I could n't, not even a child could. I dare not stay here alone while you fetch a skirt. I should *die!* I almost wish he 'd left me to my fate. I should have died like a respectable woman at any rate! He is abominable—abominable!"

She wept afresh.

"We must make a dash for it," said Muriel, with more confidence than she felt.

"And meet that Harrison man who would n't have the manners not to see me! You know that he 's already inclined to be familiar . . . if he were to see me like this——"

"Where 's Esmerelda?" demanded Muriel suddenly, remembering that it was some time since

she had caught sight of that valued pet. "Oh, I wish she would n't follow us as she does. I 'm sure it is n't safe!"

"She started off home almost as soon as I was pulled out," returned Miss Dalton shortly. "I think she felt the disgrace too: she had a most *peculiar* expression."

"Oh, *no*, Aunt Susan, how can you fancy such a thing! It 's her dinner-time, and you know she never misses."

"Her dinner-time! Then we are *bound* to meet Harrison! There . . . there 's somebody coming now. It *is* Harrison!"

The panic-stricken Miss Dalton tried to conceal herself behind a sapling that was little better than a twig, and inadequate even for a sylph. She buried her face in her hands. Perhaps he would nor recognise her, and at least she was not able to see *him*. She endured a martyrdom.

She heard a great bellow as Harrison passed on his way, and felt he was looking back. It was the last straw.

"O dear, here 's Mick!" cried Muriel, aghast, thinking how stupid it was of him to return.

Miss Dalton took her hands away from her face and indignation straightened out her shrinking form. "Coming to gloat," she snapped. "I knew it!"

Mick, keeping his eyes averted from the lady in distress, and yet somehow seeing the absurd figure, beckoned to his wife, and handed her a

parcel. "A skirt," he explained briefly, before riding off again.

"Oh, Aunt Susan, he 's brought you a skirt to go home in!" announced the relieved Muriel. "Now you won't be horrid about him any more, will you? You see he thought of it all himself."

Miss Dalton was not sure whether it was "nice-minded" of Mick to think of her deficiency or not. "Which skirt?" was all she said, adding witheringly, "How like a man!" as her best evening skirt met her eyes. However she donned it—to its entire ruin—without hesitation and rode quickly home. They did not meet a soul. Probably she would have been more grateful to Mick if she had done so; as it was, the satin skirt was ruined for nothing.

When they got back to the cottage, Mick had wisely disappeared, and did not return till the evening meal. Esmerelda was there, very angry at being kept waiting for her dinner, and very much shocked at the conduct of Miss Dalton. Her attitude seemed to express a determination to have no further respect for that lady, and Muriel hustled her into the back-kitchen before Miss Dalton should understand, and take a dislike to her.

When Mick did appear, he was treated with icy distance by the lady whose life he had saved at the cost of her decency, and best skirt. She wore a long trailing skirt, and yet the man's evil mind could only see her without any at all, slithering face downwards across the bog.

The unfortunate guest seemed fated to participate in yet another broad farce, for it was only a few days after the adventure of the bog, that something happened to place Mick in her bad books for good and all.

It was the young man's habit to rise very early, and have a long ramble before breakfast. Then he would return very hungry and silent, and Muriel would wonder how it was she never could keep down the bacon bill, though they had pigs to the right of them, pigs to the left of them, and Esmerelda within their doors.

On this special morning he was met by Muriel at the door, and he saw at once that something of a disastrous nature had happened.

"Have you seen Aunt Susan's teeth?" she enquired before he could speak.

"Seen them! Who could miss them! Why?"

"I mean have you seen them anywhere *about?*"

Mick put a quick hand to his mouth, but not before a shout of laughter had penetrated to the chamber of a very angry and suspicious lady.

"Now she 'll think it 's *you!*" wailed Muriel. "Oh, Mick, why will you always laugh at misfortunes?"

"D' yer mean she 'll think *I 've* got 'em?" he gasped, exploding again.

"Of course she did 'nt *say* so, but she was very odd, and . . . Oh, Mick, do stop laughing! How can you think it funny!"

Mick at once assumed an air of supreme gravity and legal cross-examining.

"When did she last see the accused alive?" he demanded.

"Oh, Mick."

"I mean, when were they parted in silence and tears—and why?" He was in one of his most foolish moods.

"You never take anything seriously. You are just like a clown—always performing! It 's no joke for Aunt Susan."

"Won't she ever be able to eat any more, and shall we save the *whole* of the thirty shillings a week? Where is your careful housewifely soul that you cannot see the silver lining? But perhaps she 'll expect to be fed with a spoon?"

"She *has* a few back teeth left," Muriel observed thankfully.

"Is she in a position to 'thank God they meet'?" he asked, giggling.

"Oh, how low and wicked and horrid you are! And you never help, only make fun . . . !" His wife 's lips quivered.

He patted her shoulder. "There, old girl, never mind. I 'll do my best to capture the missing property, I will indeed; only let me have my silly jokes—the laughter of a fool is sweeter than the tears of a wise man. I must laugh or go mad—madder, Miss Dalton would say. But about her teeth. Did she drop them outside—or in? I mean, could she have swallowed them?"

"Of course not: they 've just gone."

"Fortunately, I should recognise the prisoner anywhere, even in another's possession, and under any alibi. They must have dropped out when she waved a last fond adieu to Harrison. If in the frenzy of Love's Young Dream one loses one's wits—why not one's teeth!"

"Be quiet, she 'll hear you! She left them by her bed in a glass of water, and in the morning she found the glass empty and overturned and no teeth! She said she thought she heard someone push open the door in her dream—you know it won't stay closed properly—and thinks it can't have been a dream after all. Someone must have entered her room, but who?"

"I know," said Mick, instantly. "I have it! *Harrison!* He came to look for a broken sixpence to remind him, and when he could n't find a broken—or is it crooked?—sixpence, lying about, he took the teeth. Who are we to blame him? Were n't we young once and romantic ourselves?"

"*Everything's* gone wrong. Esmerelda went out early and has not returned, and I 'm sure something must have happened to her. It 's the first time she 's been late for a meal. And now Aunt Susan 's *sure* someone 's taken them—as if they would!" She eyed her husband anxiously.

"Whom does she suspect? Mrs. Hobbs?"

"Oh, Mick, she thinks it 's . . . you! Of course I know you would n't, would you?" Again she eyed him anxiously. "I don't know *what* to think!"

"It 's certainly a puzzle. Have you no idea at all?"

"Oh, I have, that 's the worst of it," wailed Muriel. "I 'm afraid it 's Esmerelda!"

"*Esmerelda?*"

"You know how curious she is, how she hates things kept away from her, and must poke her nose into everything—the dear!"

"You think she 's poked it, literally, into the teeth? My *dear* girl, what next?"

"Well, she wanted your shaving-brush yesterday, and I heard her move off the mat outside my door very early. She must have gone and seen the teeth and taken them away."

"Don't you think you give her credit for too much human mischief? After all, she is only a pig."

"But not an ordinary pig, you 've had to acknowledge that yourself. I would n't for the world she was blamed."

"Better me, eh?"

"You know she *can't* think any worse of you, and you *were* very rough with the rope. . . . Good gracious! what 's that?"

For upon the air was borne the sound of shrill squealing rapidly coming nearer, and a moment later, Esmerelda herself, frantic and screaming, tore into the cottage and lifted anguished imploring eyes to Muriel. The missing teeth were hanging from her snout where they had attached themselves —rather painfully—by gold hooks.

Esmerelda would rather have been ringed any day, though such experiences did not befall her forest friends.

"The vanity of woman!" gibed Mick, as he released the victim. "Yet I believed you content to suffer to be beautiful. I have long suspected you of being no true woman, Esmerelda. . . !" He laughed gaily.

As he stood with the teeth in his hand, a broad grin on his face, the door opened, and Miss Dalton, a shawl over her mouth, entered, majestical and full of outraged dignity.

"As I *supposed*," she said, in a voice that would have been terrible had not its effectiveness been lost through an indistinct mumble. "Is it too much to ask, that when you have *quite* finished your amusement, I may be favoured with the return of my stolen property?"

"I assure you it was n't me. It was—" he began quickly, but he stopped as Muriel, having wiped Esmerelda's bloody snout, looked up imploringly. Miss Dalton turned her back, there came a little click, then she wheeled round, and there was that on her face which should have made the guilty tremble.

"Why not accuse Esmerelda?" she suggested sarcastically.

"I was just going to!"

"Liar!" burst from Miss Dalton ere she subsided into floods of tears.

Breakfast was scarcely a congenial meal. Es-

merelda had much the best of it, being fed and petted by the two ladies, one on account of the pain she had suffered, the other because of the base aspersion cast upon her character.

Harrison interrupted the meal to leave a parcel he had brought from the station. He turned his eyes quickly from Miss Dalton for he remembered her as she had appeared behind the sapling shoot.

"He 's gettin' a fat 'un," he said considering Esmerelda. "Fourpence a pound any day you like, Mr. Talbot!"

"Be silent, man!" commanded Miss Dalton.

"Do you mean Esmerelda *is* a 'he'?" gasped Muriel dismayed. "Then we 've christened her—him—all wrong."

"You have that!" agreed Harrison with a very broad grin.

"Oh, Mick, what a tiresome mistake!"

Then the speaker caught a wink exchanged between the two men, and stiffened at once. "I believe you knew and did it on purpose!"

"You would n't let me call him William; you wanted something like 'Maggie.' What could I do?"

Harrison after a long stealthy glance at Miss Dalton fled suddenly, chuckling hoarsely as he went.

"That man ought to be reported for disrespect!" said Miss Dalton, scarlet. "But of course, *your* friends . . . " turning to Mick with incoherent rage.

"He tells me things about pigs I did n't know before," said Mick apologetically.

"Things no nice-minded person would *want* to know, I expect!" snorted Miss Dalton.

"How can I change Esmerelda now?" wailed Muriel. "It suited her and she liked it from the first! Oh, Mick, you might have been more careful. And to think she 's a 'he!' "

"Well, at any rate, my awful visions of finding ten little pigs or so knocking about, the offspring of Esmerelda seeking to repay us for her keep, in the only way she could think of, is not to be feared any longer. Mrs. Hobbs would disastrously seek to prove them an illusion. I 'm awfully glad it 's a Mister myself."

"You 're a coarse-minded person," announced Miss Dalton, rising and leaving the room.

"Oh, Mick, why must you say such things! Be so careless!" complained his wife. "She will never get to like you now!"

CHAPTER IX

THE PAST UNVEILED

"Oh, my noble lords and ladies,
Jesting, jesting *is n't* a joke!"
When Knights Were Bold.

"You tore aside the veil, a dreadful gleam,
Revealed the sights you had not feared to see,
And a great darkness fell upon the shrine."
MAURICE BARING.

THREE times had Mick attempted the more or less timely jest, and three times had he met with severe reproof, once from his wife, and twice from her aunt. The third time he shrugged his shoulders, and strode out across the moors up to Bramble Hill from whence he could look down on a vast sea of woods and Isle of Wight hills, and know that beyond them lay the sea and out-going ships.

His eyes took a far-away look; he seemed to be looking into the vast spaces of the world, to be listening to the song of Vagabondia, and he forgot that he must stop his ears to the call of his desire. Up flashed the phantasmagoria before his tormented eyes, the prairie, the desert, vast seas, and

the strange cities of strange men. . . . It was the Belovéd holding out longing, aching arms, and though his whole being cried out to her, he must turn aside. It was duty hand in hand with Hell: it was death in life—bread within sight but not reach of a starving, bound man! It was all the tortures of all the ages!

Oh, those ten years and their harvest of magic memories! Ten glorious years when his feet seemed Perseus-bound and men called him Ulysses, not all in jest . . . dead years now. Never again, never again, for there was Muriel: he was bound to her and she to him, and the galling chains must be borne to the end. Holy matrimony!

A flash of anguish passed across his face as Gore's laughing, blue eyes looked suddenly into his. Gore the perfect man-comrade who had brought him devotion and laughter and life, but to whom he had brought a darker gift. A great sable finger, like the shadow of death, pressed for a moment on his eyelids and he grew deadly cold in the sunshine. Then it had passed, claimed that other victim; and only the unbearable memory was left.

Once at a camp-fire, an old weird man, that most held mad, grey with years of suffering, full of strange stories and stranger superstitions, spoke of one whose love had brought misfortune on all he held dear, and as he listened to the terrible story Mick's heart had been shaken with ghastly fear.

Was he such a one as this? Were such things possible? Then he had assured himself passion-

ately it was but an idle tale, a foolish superstition: that even if such things were, no such devil's curse lay on him. His own experience had been strange, had shaken him for the moment, but what was it but coincidence upon coincidence? Many had loved him, though his love had been given to few. But those few were dead, and recklessly unseeing, it was he who had shown them the road. . . . Still it was so little put into words: just the faithful dog of his boyhood, a gallant horse—and Gore. . . . The old man had been undoubtedly mad, but it was madder still to dwell on such imaginary curses.

Mick had been a reckless, sullen boy, whose lonely heart was open to one thing, the love of a mongrel rescued by him from the streets; it had looked on him as providence for nine years, and together they had taken their long tireless rambles. Then had come that day—by an unknown shore—when the dog, for the first time in his life, refused, his eyes piteous, to swim for his master's stick. The boy, no more than the man, would brook opposition, and the dog though he seemed to know his master was ordering him to death for a whim, obeyed the second command. There was a look almost of an attempt at puzzled comprehension, certainly so it afterwards seemed to Mick, of farewell, then in a little while the tide brought the body out of the treacherous current, and the eyes were puzzled still. . . . Mick had said nothing, showed no outward sign

of sorrow, but he had almost broken his heart over the first tragedy of his life—for tragedy it had been to him—and the old wound throbbed now at the memory. He had never had another dog.

Then years later came the veldt pony; that had been bad, but not as bad. Such a willing little beast, such a good jumper, till the day he refused a long narrow gap! He had jumped a wider chasm many a time, but he would not jump this—till spurred to it! Then he jumped bravely enough—into a hidden hole on the other side. Mick had escaped lightly enough, but not so the horse, whom he had shot.

The dog and the horse he could forget; but he could not forget young Gore.

They had met in Cairo, the lad in charge of a tutor, whom his high spirits found somewhat of a trial. The man had been chosen for him by elderly anxious parents—for the boy of twenty had for mother, a woman of sixty-five, and his father was over seventy. The child had come like a miraculous gift after twenty-five years of married life, saving the estate from a distant and profligate branch. From the first the elderly couple had idolised the boy, though they had never spoiled him. The village bells had rung for a week at his birth, old Gore had seen to that; but no one had laughed. There was no handsomer baby in the county than young Gore, by which name he was known, even in his infancy.

After Oxford, the old people gave him one out of

the precious years of their lives to see the world; he was to return for his coming of age and the beginning of his parliamentary career. He was a clever, even brilliant boy, and great things were expected of him. It is possible that he might have achieved them all—if he had not met Michael Talbot and come under his fatal fascination.

Mick was going into the desert, and Gore wanted to go too, but the staid tutor refused; he had heard it was rash, if not actually dangerous, to go as Michael was going. His disapproval of the vagabond's recklessness was written on his face for all to see. Then young Gore dismissed his tutor and wrote to tell his people what an ideal, mirthful companion he had found.

So he rode into the desert with Mick, and at home his people marked off the crawling days on a calendar.

On a certain date he would be back with them again, for he had promised; and young Gore always kept his promises. Meanwhile, he wrote each week, and though sometimes his letters were delayed, they always got them in the end, usually from some unheard-of place, and learned that their boy was having the time of his life, and what "a ripping chap" Talbot was! As soon as possible they set about making preparations for his twenty-first birthday. And he would have been there—if it had n't been for certain untoward circumstances.

Twice they had come upon it—that caravan of trading Arabs who were neither friendly nor un-

friendly, till the young wife of their old chief cast luminous eyes at the young Englishmen. She was full of a passionate beauty, her lord and master dark as herself, the most jealous of elderly husbands, and in her wanton eyes the Englishmen seemed wondrous fair, god-like lovers.

It was the slim youth with the blue eyes and fair hair that enchained her fancy first, and at whom she looked the longer, but it was the bold, dark one that looked back at her. The young one passed on like a holy prophet, taking no heed.

"The old chap shan't be jealous without a cause," chuckled Michael, who was not in the habit of declining amorous adventure, or deaf to the sensuous claims of the East; and though young Gore implored him to leave the girl alone, and prophesied disaster, he would not listen. The high ideals of the lad seemed ridiculous, and were certainly inconvenient.

So Mick stole from his camp, and the girl, by some miracle eluding the vigilance of her sleeping tyrant, stole from hers; they met several times, for though she would have preferred the fair-haired, blue-eyed lover, she turned easily enough to the other, and East and West clung together, to ultimate disaster.

One night as the girl stole back at dawn, the old man awoke; there were accusations, torture, and—confession.

Early that morning, the English camp was sursounded by hostile Arabs, and the chief, his trad-

ing interpreter by his side, looked with fierce, triumphant eyes on the two surprised, bound men.

He looked longest, deepest, deadliest, on the fair youth, who seemed in his eyes like a god, for the agonised woman had spoken but of "the Englishman."

Then he waved his hand, and a covered litter was brought in, and placed between the two Englishmen. The curtains were drawn aside, and the dead, tortured face of the faithless wife showed horrible in the pitiless light.

In a sudden flash the Englishmen realised all, and Mick set his quick brain to think out a way of escape. He had been in tighter places before.

Young Gore thought of the unhappy dead girl, and the price of sin that someone must pay. Maybe he thought, too, of an old couple waiting with clear faith for the day of his coming: he had never failed them yet, but he must fail them now. He thought of the name he bore and all it meant, but his love for Michael Talbot rose stronger than these things.

Mick was sorry, horribly sorry, yet he placed half the blame with the girl, who had been the seeker as much as the sought, and since she was dead, (though he shuddered at the manner of her unspeakable death) all that mattered now was that he and young Gore—specially young Gore—should escape.

That the boy should be imperilled for him was out of the question. The Arabs must understand

his innocence and put the blame on the right shoulders. He must tell them so, and be quick about it. He did not like the way the old chief was eyeing the lad. He would explain at once—and then make what fight he could for his life. But young Gore was quicker; he beckoned the interpreter and said clearly, "I, and I alone, am guilty: only I must pay. Let my friend go. He knows nothing of the thing——"

The words were being translated to the chief even as Mick broke out into passionate denials, swearing that the guilt was his, and that his alone must be the payment. And all the time young Gore, who hated lies, contradicted him clearly and calmly.

The Arabs saw no beauty in Michael, who approached their own type, but to them young Gore was uncannily beautiful. They remembered how in passing, the dead girl's eyes had dwelt on him, and him alone—and even now their fearful glare seemed to turn towards him—so that though the guilty man swore the guilt was his, and begged the life of the other offering his own, he spoke to deaf ears. They called him madman, fool, and liar, and drove their knives into young Gore. The lad was hacked to pieces before Mick's eyes, his comeliness most horribly spoiled.

Then they cut Mick's bonds and the bonds of his few servants, enacting no further vengeance, for they were just men, and rode quickly away, leaving him with the dead girl and the dead man—his sin and the fruit thereof.

He buried them himself, and the grave of one he watered with slow, anguished tears. Too late! Too late!

The woman lay in the shade, but it would take more than the dust of the desert and passing years to hide that terrible face. It rose before him now, and he gasped like a drowning man.

> In the golden noon—by the lover's moon,
> My shadow bars your way,
> My shroud shows white in the blackest night,
> And grey in the gladdest day.
> And by your board and by your bed,
> There is a place for me;
> And in the glow when the coals burn low,
> My face is the face ye see.[1]

He had proved, trebly proved, the truth of that haunting poem. "*By your board and by your bed; there is a place for me!*" he echoed drearily, and his face was no longer the face of the jester, but of a haunted man.

Young Gore slept under the burning sun, a great pile of stones marking the ending of his little day. His life's work, his parents' broken hearts, lay there too. At eve the shadow of a great cross fell aslant his desert grave, chance passers-by would tread upon the holy ground and wonder idly what story lay hidden under the simple words, "*Greater love hath no man than this . . .* " and the name and date. And that hacked body rose side by side with the other from out of the grave.

[1] *The Past*, Mrs. E. Nesbit.

There was the monument for all men to see, but what of the secret monument he had sought to raise? What of the life that was to be more worthy of such a friendship! How few and poor the stones, in spite of what might be called immaculate conduct: no sins of commission—the harvest of omission only! When would *that* monument raise its stately head? The very trees waved mocking arms at him, shrieked "Never!" into his ears. It had been comparatively easy to make burnt offerings of the big vices, but the *little* things . . . ! There was n't much to show so far. The building remained at a standstill, and he was bitter and warped and jested buffoon-wise, lest memory should stir too fiercely. He sought to lay his ghosts with laughter.

As he stood racked with morbid thoughts of those whose deaths, in his dark moments, he believed lay at his door, he was almost thankful to remember that he and the woman he had named the Elf, were never likely to meet again.

"Heaven knows what fate I might not bring on her!" he muttered, for, much as young Gore had been to him, yet she was more: comrade, as the man had been comrade, and added to that the woman he had grown to love with a love that grew greater day by day. It was certainly well, from all points of view, that their paths in life lay far apart.

He had gone to the Wayne Collection, found her picture at once, and bought it, but of the artist

he could discover no trace. She was "out of England", that was all anybody knew. In a month or a year or half a dozen years, she would appear suddenly and without notice as she had done before, would call on her agent for news of how her pictures were going, and any money he might have in hand for her—which money she would at once spend in the most improvident manner possible. Miss Elphenstonne was always a beggar—albeit a beggar with a glad heart; she possessed that which money can buy, also that which no wealth could purchase; but money was never hers for more than a day. She was very much the female complement of Michael Talbot.

He hung the picture he had seen painted, in the best light possible, and would gaze at it before his wife came down in the morning. At such times the girl, who was becoming an obsession to him, would seem very near, but, when Muriel came down, he would remember, and the picture would fade, leaving but the grey prison walls of his captivity. Things had been growing worse instead of better lately in the rich uncle's cottage, and Mr. Higgins would have been more than shocked if he could have known how far apart two could grow in such a tiny space. The two women, holding together, let Mick see that he was in disgrace, drove him mad by their narrow ignorant stupidity, and a thousand pin-pricks. His morbidity gained on him, made him see things in an abnormal light: see infinitely more than there was to see. He told

himself that there was nothing to make life worth while: that he was at the end, instead of the beginning. A wave of utter soul-sickness passed over him, and talent and ambition withered before it. He flung aside *Pagan People*, "I shall never do anything now," he assured himself. "It is too late. I am becoming atrophied."

His violent egoism, in which he saw himself as the centre of a world sadly out of joint, appeared even in his own eyes contemptible and ridiculous, but persisted just the same. He was prisoner of the world, of fate, of himself, bound in iron chains.

The ache of loneliness, intellectual, physical, complete, drove him to long exhausting walks. He would go out at dawn, his pockets full of sandwiches, and return late, his face drawn with fatigue. Then he would lie awake, and it would drive him mad to listen to Muriel's soft breathing. Her soulless prettiness got more than ever on his nerves, and there were times when he came near to hating her, when he woke after a brief, uneasy slumber, in a cold sweat from the nightmare of feeling a woman's soft throat under merciless, joyful fingers. In his dreams, the moral sense died, the other self triumphed, and he turned away with a laugh from the inert body of his wife. He would tramp to the sea, stand between it and a dark line of forest, listen to the hush of night sweeping up to his restless feet, and feel that there was peace all around; and only in his own heart the sword. But though he fled as if pursued by a devil, a thousand devils

kept pace with him: he could never leave himself behind. He was plunged in a flood of torment, which the June beauty of the forest aggravated rather than soothed. He did not want beauty, he hated it in moments like these; he wanted wild, savage lands, wild, savage ways, all the unchained winds, and he wanted the Elf.

What to him the glow, and the gold, and the fringe of purple trees? The cry of joyous bird to joyous bird, the soft, deep, laughing rustle of the pines, the swish of the corn in the wind, like the trailing skirts of fair women, the bridal glory of the whole earth? Nothing—less than nothing. And then home and dreams, brief and terrible, again.

To wake from them was appalling; he was as a man panting back from the pit of Hell. He would force himself to be as good as he knew how, to the woman he had unwillingly married,—but, without love, companionship, a single idea in common, it was not easy. Not easy enough, at least, for Michael Talbot, who had not been endowed with a nature leading to patience or sacrifice.

In his dreams he could not help it that the Elf's hand lay in his, and a great joy flooded his soul, but he honestly tried to thrust her from his side by day—when he remembered Muriel.

"If I had only known in time, suspected for one minute," was the ceaseless burden of his cry, but he had been so ignorant of where his feet were treading. To be "in love" had meant a very brief,

a very burning passion; he had felt it frequently during those ten years, forgotten it in a week. It had been a passing, physical thing; woman rather than a woman; and it was the last thing in the world to be associated with the Elf. Three weeks of friendship, three weeks of intimate understanding and perfect companionship in a lonely Swiss inn—and the ache of a lifetime to spring from it! It was not just, it was intolerable, and worse than intolerable, for it was—ridiculous. He would tell himself that he would refuse to be haunted, since the cold, iron gates of a loveless marriage shut out all hope of better things. He might—he *would*—forget the Elf. For a few days the inconsequent winds of the world had blown her to him, he from the East, she from the West, both tramps on Life's Highway.

Life's Highway, the other passion seized him at thought of those two words, tore at him with its greedy, restless fingers.

To shut his eyes to the allure of that road! The task felt greater than his strength. His place was out yonder. It had its use for him. There was no niche for him here. Inevitably, some day he would go back. Even Judas went to his own place. He could see the long, winding stretch of that magic road, going on and on, having no beginning, knowing no end, save time; he felt the hands of the light-hearted, light-pocketed fellow-travellers, and the walls of civilisation went down with a crash.

Eight months of misery daily growing worse,

each day an eternity, and ten times a thousand eternities to run! It was unthinkable! In the end the walls would break, go down, like the walls of Jericho, before the trumpet-call.

After all, Muriel would be far happier without him. There was that six thousand pounds, it would all be hers to do with as she pleased; he would add to it, make it ten, write another *Doubtful Duchess* at once, settle it on her, and then—disappear. He had known more than one man who had "disappeared" and was believed by his family to be dead. They had shaken off unwelcome shackles, so why not he, to whom the shackles were more galling still? Soon there would come to Muriel news—sufficient proofs even—of his death. What matter what name an unknown man was buried under? It could be worked, should be worked: his ingenuity would see to that. It would be no grief, no loss, to Muriel. She would be a young widow, a beautiful young widow, with an income. She would not be blind to the advantages of her position. She would marry again and easily and all would be well. He would never return to England; there would be no danger of discovery; after his supposed death he would start afresh with a new name.

He would not stay for ever between two closing walls since for him a way of escape showed clear. "Closing walls!" The words conjured before his vivid mental vision that devil torture of mediæval times.

He could see him so plainly—with a face that was as his own face—the victim, shut in the iron room, the ceiling dropping inch by inch, the walls creeping nearer, but slowly, very slowly, even stopping now and then, for that was part of the agony. The victim must die by inches, a hundred deaths, suffer a hundred tortures—make futile, ridiculous efforts to escape. Always the ridiculous—in life, in love, in death: maybe in the world beyond! A thought of Miss Dalton in conventional angel attire, looking askance at some of the members of the incongruous crowd of the Blessed, came to twist his lip in laughter even then. Then again he saw the wretch in his prison; saw him throw himself against one wall, to escape the other, only to be pressed on to his inevitable doom, now flinging himself face downwards on the floor, with a haunting cry, calling upon a deaf God, Christian or pagan,while the slow, grinding torture began. He saw it all so horribly plainly, and cursed the vivid imagination bestowed upon him, to be his bane. He thought of another prison he had once entered in the East, of the terrible, grey remnant of humanity that lay there, indifferent to its fate; of the grey death stealing over it, the grey dawn, and the grey walls! but they were grey with life, not death.

He had fled from the place, but he could not fly from the picture his mental eyes saw against his will. Prison walls seemed all around him, unnumbered humanity shut within them, without a view, a chance of escape—since only one

in a multitude is strong enough to break the walls that men call fate.

Staring, with lips locked, hands clenched, Mick saw the iron gin close on the writhing victim, and out of the place taken something hideous, unspeakable, unclean, something that was no longer human—something to be covered with ashes. So as he looked into his own special trap, which, humanwise, he deemed worse than the trap of another, his cry was the terrible cry of Cain, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" And he looked, too, into the Elf 's haunting, sea-green eyes, and hated the vacant beauty of the woman who was his wife.

Then he gazed, with unseeing vision, at a red sun dropping into the great arms of the forest, and the heather scattering into pools of blood. He saw nothing, heard nothing, his face was turned to where the sea lay, his thoughts drifted like derelicts on a strong tide . . . and he sailed for shores unknown of man, echoing with a terrible longing those words of John Masefield:

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea
and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the
white sails' shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn
breaking!

CHAPTER X

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

AS he entered his abode, Mick was met at the door by Muriel, who announced that Miss Dalton had sprained her wrist, and required a doctor.

Though exhausted with a day's tramp, and faint for want of food, Mick at once got out his bicycle, and went to the bare, bleak, little house, some miles on the other side of the moor, where the nearest doctor was to be found, and was scarcely back with the message that he was following on his machine, before the doctor himself arrived.

Dr. Byrne was a brown-faced man with a brown beard and kindly deep-set eyes. Though short, stout, and thick-set, he was not without a strong attraction of his own. With much to make him cynical and bitter, he was always bright and optimistic, and quite unsparing of himself. He spent himself more than generously on his patients, who repaid him by grumbling at his bills, and more often than not ignoring their obligations altogether. He was only "the doctor," their servant

—nearly their slave. They sent for him when they were really frightened; at other times forgot his existence. He had a spare and poor practice, and a complaining invalid sister. His whole life had been a sacrifice to others: to his parents, who had given him no peace till he relinquished his dreams of an ambitious London practice, in order to take his father's place after him; to his peevish, hysterical sister; to his patients, who demanded all and gave nothing, not even the truth; seldom the credit when he had won life for them, instead of death, but always the credit for the death. They were, to say the truth of it, a thankless generation. Yet a sense of humour had survived which made his life possible, and even pleasant, and, unlike Mick, he never looked back on the might-have-been, but set a brave face steadily forward. His one passion was pictures, and he was keenly interested in the lives of their painters. He had no sooner crossed the threshold than he caught sight of Mick's treasure, and examined it eagerly.

"That 's the real thing," he said approvingly. He sighed for a moment, for he would never be able to afford himself a treasure such as this, while his sister lived; and he was sincere in his wish that she might live for many years. Any luxury for the bare little house went into the greedy thankless fingers of Miss Byrne.

He bent closer over the signature.

"Elphenstonne? The lady who painted *A Baltic Shore*'?"

"You know her work?"

"I have not seen much, not as much as I could wish, but I have noticed it. It 's so alive, so promising, so talented. I manage a visit to the galleries twice a year when the excursions are on, and I have grown to look for her name in the smaller galleries. I always feel she 'll be in the biggest one of these days, the forefront perhaps, but you—do *you* know her?"

"I have met her," said Mick, in a tone that closed the discussion.

The doctor spent valuable time over Miss Dalton and her sprained wrist, and finally prepared for departure. As he shook hands, Mrs. Hobbs appeared out of the back-kitchen, and started slightly at sight of him; she met his nod of recognition with a freezing stare and returned with head erect to the back-kitchen.

Dr. Byrne's deep-set eyes twinkled. "Alas! one of my failures," he said, in an undertone to Mick. "I *did* cure her, but not in the way she appreciated, and we parted rather less than friends."

"I thought Dr. Byrne was your doctor," Mick said afterwards to the charwoman.

"Once," she replied loftily, "but he 's no longer employed by me. I gave 'im the chuck after my last illness. He put my dieiknowsit all wrong, and it 's not got settled right to this diy. He 'ad the impidence to tell me I 'ad somethink what I never *did* 'ave, nor would n't, was it ever

so, and contradicted me that rude, that I just said I 'ad n't no use for 'im. A fat lot of good 'e is as a doctor! Ho yus! You wait till 'e tries it hon with your aunt!"

But Miss Dalton did not agree with Mrs. Hobbs. She liked the doctor, and drew out her indisposition longer than she would have done if he had been a married man, or she a married woman. One never knew. Stranger things had happened.

"'E only gets the farms and cottages," said Mrs. Hobbs, with a sniff. "An' the wiy 'e 'as the winder open givin' sick folk their death is a fair disgrice!" Her curious eyes followed a carriage and pair conveying a smart old lady down the Shrewsbury Road. "What a lovely bonnet to get converted in!" she sighed.

Mick's face fell. "But not so soon again, Mrs. Hobbs!" he begged imploringly.

"I 'ave n't got a bonnet suitable," the charlady sighed reluctantly, "so it 'as to be put off, but I feel the need of grice somethink awful, and 'opes to get done afore long."

She always spoke of being converted as "getting done."

Unconverted, Mrs. Hobbs was a sinful woman, but a divine cook; converted, she became quite a holy person—while it lasted—but a shocking cook, her thoughts being on other matters. She uttered "Hallelujahs" at inconsequent moments, and when remonstrated with on the score of her cooking, rebuked the speaker for "carnal appe-

tite." In a state of grace she was very much to be dreaded. The period usually lasted from three days to three weeks, after which she had a truly awful and sinful outbreak in the whisky line, and remained invisible for about a week with "influenzy" or "neuralgy." That week over, a somewhat shaken, but normal, Mrs. Hobbs appeared, taking up in an entirely matter-of-course way her work from where she had left it. She had, since her service at the cottage, been already converted once—though not entirely to her satisfaction—and Mick had hoped she would be content for some months to come.

However, the sight of the old lady's very smart bonnet had sown the seed of desire, and having spent five shillings on bright flowers in imitation of the unsuspecting dowager's Bond Street toque, Mrs. Hobbs only a few days later, announced her fell intention to the dismayed Michael.

"I 'm goin' into Southampton to get converted," she told Mick dramatically. "They don't do you proper in the forest; no workin' you hup somethink hawful like they did in Lunnon, no screamin' nor shoutin' nor nothink; a pore lazy lot even about gettin' grice, I always siy. There 's a noo minister come to Southampton for a spell what mikes you cry at sight of 'im, and 'as folk in 'ystericks stright awiy,—really rousin' 'e is. I 'm going to be done there proper this time, an' shall want the whole diy off. Please tell Mrs. Talbot when she comes 'ome."

"It 's diversion you want, not conversion!" muttered Mick injudiciously. "And you know how upset you are afterwards with nerves. I wish you would n't! Can't you put if off a little longer?"

"You' ave to go when the spirit moves you," said Mrs. Hobbs curtly, and departed on her errand.

Mick broke the bad news to Muriel, and for some weeks their domestic arrangements left much to be desired in the way of comfort.

When Muriel complained that the charlady had forgotten to put the tea in the pot, and had served up boiling water, that lady crossed her arms and answered with a majestic hallelujah; and when Mick waxed plaintive over uneatable chops, she merely informed him she was "sived" and ignored anything so carnal as chops.

Then Mick, with deliberate and criminal intent, left a whole bottle of whisky lying about, and when Mrs. Hobbs returned after a few days' absence she was once more the character they had learned to make the best of, and even, so far as Mick himself was concerned, got some amusement out of.

She arrived in specially genial mood, and the bearer of news.

"There 's an artist coming," she announced, as one stating the sensational coming of a criminal. "'E 's got a name scrawled any'ow which is a fair corker, an' is goin' to camp out hopposite 'avin' got leave. 'Arrison is sendin' John down for 'im an' 'is traps this very evenin'."

"Perhaps he 'll be an acquisition," said Miss Dalton eagerly.

"'E 'll be worse 'n that," returned Mrs. Hobbs, without any doubt whatsoever. "I 've lived along o' them and I know. A' acquisition—ho yus! 'E 's *from Paris.*"

No one could say worse than that.

"Always fair terrors after the petticoats—which did n't even 'ave one! I seed things through the key'ole what 'd mike your 'air stand on nend. Ho yus!"

Mick was moved to an injudicious defence of the clean, gay city he loved. Had he not spent many profitable days there? Was it not the home —when she had one—of the Elf herself?

"There are beauties in Paris—" he began.

Mrs. Hobbs checked him at once. "As a respectable female I don't want no 'istory of the other sort," she said virtuously.

Mick laughed. "I was alluding to the artistic beauties, thinking of the architecture, the pictures——"

"I prefer *not* to think of them, 'avin' once done the Wallace Collection with a lidy friend what said she 'd be sorry to 'ave 'er 'usband see. What I don't know about artists and journalists 'avin' kept a boardin'-'ouse for them, ain't worth knowin', nor decent to talk about."

"I assure you, your experience, though unfortunate in its way, was unique. The majority are not what you suppose. You happened to be

unlucky enough to be let in for the Gunter set—a set pretty well cut by reputable Bohemians: they were n't even genuine writers or painters, merely degenerate, decadent——"

"Talkin' don't mike sows ears into silk purses," interrupted Mrs. Hobbs contemptuously. "They was artists an' journalists and behived as sich, and I for one never expected anythink else though 'avin' a livin' to mike. . . . This feller will be the sime, an' it won't be long afore he learns there 's a young lidy left unprotected owin to her 'usband bein' on the tramp all diy an' writin' 'is trash all night."

When Mick came in for supper that evening, he was secretly amused to find his wife and Miss Dalton more elaborately attired than usual. Mrs Hobbs, however, had obtained best position in the window. As the "discoverer" of the artist, she plainly held it her right.

"There 's the cart a-comin' now," she announced with the air of a showman. "What a wettin' 'e 'll get—serve 'im right too! Paintin' natur—*ho yus!*"

"All this excitement about a profligate artist," grumbled Mick, eyeing the cooling meal in dismay. "We can see him any time, but this pie is deteriorating by inches!"

No one took the least notice of him. He sat with his back to the window, gazing at his empty plate with a sigh, and waited till the excitement should have subsided.

"There was three startin' letters an' a nime as long as my arm," remarked Mrs. Hobbs.

"An A.R.A.!" suggested Miss Dalton excitedly. "Fancy, Muriel, an A.R.A.!"

"Do you know if he 's young, unmarried, tall?" enquired Muriel eagerly, of the charwoman.

"Harrison showed me the letter, but it did n't tell nothink at all—sive that 'e 'ad n't learned his letters no more 'n a babby, like a spider it was!"

"Without a doubt a genius!" interposed Mick, stealthily drawing the tasty pie closer. "I am going to cut it—do come!"

A cry from the three spectators caused him to drop his knife with a clatter.

"Why, it 's a *woman!*" shrilled Miss Dalton indignantly.

"Such an odd plain little creature!" came from Muriel.

"A female from Paris," was Mrs. Hobbs's grim contribution. "Now we shan't be long! I wonder *who* she 's come after?" She darted a suspicious glance at Mick.

Harrison's John was looking very startled himself. It was obvious that, being prepared to meet a man, he had not yet got over the shock of his surprise.

"A woman!" Mick was surprised though not sufficiently interested to go to the window himself. "Well, she 'll be company for you, Muriel—and we can start now!" He dug his knife into the pie.

"Ho yus!" retorted Mrs. Hobbs, eyeing him severely. "I don't think!"

"I don't think I care for her appearance," said Muriel stiffly. "Though not really young, she is too young to be gadding about like this by herself, and she 's *very* odd-looking. And mad! She 's taken off her coat and hat and put them in the bottom of the cart and is getting drenched as if she enjoyed it! She hardly looks . . . civilised."

She came slowly to the table and sat down. "Why don't you go on carving?" she enquired impatiently. "We 're ready." For Mick had risen and stood staring through the window as if at an incredible vision. The unconscious subject of so much observation sat very high on the board of the cart, her face upturned to the driving wind and rain. With her dark, eager, little, brown face, her massive, black hair, she looked more like a sprite than a woman. She had a tiny, slim form, and hands of amazing smallness covered with flashing rings. The rain had flushed her brown cheeks and glistened on the ropes of dark, grey-tinged hair—hair which people thought black till they saw it in the sun and found it dull, glowing copper.

Odd, perhaps, but scarcely plain, in spite of dark skin, too-long chin, too-wide mouth, and blunt nose; even though the whole face was just a little worn with a too strenuous life; for the eyes would have redeemed ugliness itself. Green as

the sea, capable of all the changing moods of the sea, ever wonderful, ever rare: eyes set very curiously too, very deep, very dark, very far apart; wide open always with a strangely fearless gaze—the eyes of a dreamer, perhaps even of a genius, but of no common soul.

As she sat there glorying in the rough caress of wind and rain, she fitted into the scene as a will-o'-the wisp fits into the moors. It was merely that she "belonged," and "to belong" to her temporary setting was one of the many curious gifts of the rather curious Miss Elphenstonne.

She was always perfectly at home—at a great embassy with her grandmother's rubies in her hair, riding over a desert, or painting in a shabby Paris studio. And wherever she went, and whatever she did, her small, virile face was always unconsciously set towards the light.

"She looks no better than a vagabond," said Miss Dalton, smoothing down her "best" dark skirt. No dressmaker could help Miss Dalton's garments getting "rucked" just below the waistline when she sat down.

"A vagabond!" cried Mick, with a great bellow of joy. "That 's just what she is!" And dashed through the doorway.

"'E seems to know 'er," remarked Mrs. Hobbs ominously. "Probably she 's 'is Paris Past—or one of 'em!"

Muriel only laughed. Jealous of that pagan little creature with the dreadfully dark skin and

wide, curveless mouth! Why she was almost haggard, looked thirty-five, and that was four years older than Mick. Admire a woman with four years to the bad, and a dash of grey in her hair! Absolutely out of the question—ridiculous, and neither then, nor at any time, did jealousy come into the affair.

Had the artist been in the least pretty in the most commonplace way, her skin fairer, her hair skilfully "tinted," her tiny figure a few inches taller, then the note of warning would have been quickly sounded, but while Mick saw Helen, the World's Desire, his wife saw only an odd, plain woman, "getting on," who might be clever (and cleverness was a disability in these affairs: men were afraid of clever women) but certainly was not attractive. Her features were really rather awful, and her eyes "peculiar."

Men and women viewed Miss Elphenstonne with very different vision. She was the type of woman who, as men are so quick to assure their wives, is not at all pretty. In this they spoke the truth. Miss Elphenstonne was not in the least pretty, though at times she could look beautiful. She had something more dangerous than prettiness, for the art of fascination was hers to an unusual degree. Muriel never guessed that she had added to the artist's age by more than five years, and that when Miss Elphenstonne entered a crowded reception, in one of her Paris frocks, half the men present never saw, or wished to

see, anyone else. If she could, and frequently did, look uncommonly plain, Miss Elphenstonne had also that inner, illusive beauty which triumphs over mere features, and lights into surpassing loveliness the faces of its fortunate possessors. Only the hair and the eyes, the expression of the mobile mouth, the exquisite teeth, mattered at moments such as these: she became beauty itself in a flash, for a flash, and men followed blindly the small, elfin figure as it danced in and out like some flame of fire. In the small body was the fiercest, most intense life.

But there were other times, more frequent times, which would, alas! become more frequent still as time passed, when drawn, sallow, her mouth unutterably weary, the girl was plain to downright ugliness, when she would have been hideous—save for her eyes.

A celebrated author, one of her oldest and warmest friends and admirers, had once laughingly compared her to a house standing alone in a lane, very dark and drear and unnoticeable, till its countless windows flashed into radiant light, when it became a palace and the only thing that mattered in the lane at all! And the simile was an apt one. Just now as she rode past, tired, damp, unexpectant, the house stood blank, unillumined.

Mick came dashing up to the high cart, and seizing the artist's tiny hands wrung them ruthlessly.

"The Elf!" he choked. "The Elf!—*at last!*"

He drew a long breath, gazing at her with face afire.

John squinted down his long, thin nose at his fare and her friend, and decided it was "a rum go."

"If it is n't Ulysses—the Vagabond himself!" cried Miss Elphenstonne, amazed and delighted. Her eyes shone and the weariness passed from her face. The house was illumined throughout now, and John suddenly decided his odd fare was "none so dusty to look at after all." "I thought you were going to Turkey?"

"And I thought *you* were going to Italy!" he retorted. "I say, John, you need n't wait. I 'll see to the lady's things being put straight; expect I know more of camping-out than you."

John departed, wondering what "was up between them two" and later discussed the matter with Mrs. Hobbs, who implied the worst.

"What Heaven-sent wind has blown you here?" demanded the radiant young man as he started on the tent.

"I 've come back from Italy and I 've got a job. A rich old gentleman, who had lived close to here, saw one of my pictures, and commissioned me to paint a series of certain forest scenes, and, as I wanted to get into nature's solitudes to paint a picture of my own—*the* picture—I accepted joyfully, and here I am! But it seems too good to be true to find you here also. I suppose you 're camping out somewhere? I hope my tents won't

leave me roofless the first windy night. What a funny little cottage! Who lives there?"

"I do."

"You sybarite! So that 's *your* solitary retreat. Well, I prefer mine."

"Not—not solitary," returned Mick, crimsoning.

She looked at his scarlet face, then at the cottage, which she now noticed gave distinct evidences of feminine touches, and frowned. Then she gave the careless shrug of a woman whom few situations take aback.

"Oh, I see!" she said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Mick could have carried off the situation she suspected much more easily than the true one. Twice he attempted an explanation, twice the hateful words stuck in his throat.

Miss Elphenstonne, a little surprised at his agony of embarrassment, strove to relieve him by treating the matter with frank carelessness.

"Quite an ideal spot for two," she said.

"But there are *five!*" gasped Mick.

"*Five!*" she echoed astonished, then subsided into helpless laughter. "Oh, Mick—a harem! What *do* you mean?"

He too laughed—rather desperately. "Yes, Esmerelda and Mrs. Hobbs, Miss Dalton and—Muriel."

"Tell me about Muriel," she suggested.

"Esmerelda is the pig, black and hairy and horribly intelligent. Mrs. Hobbs, the cook and whisky-drinker."

"I see." The artist waited patiently for further revelations. There was something he did not want to tell her sooner than he could help.

"She finds the whisky *wherever* you put it," he said with a mirthless laugh. "We play a regular game of hide-and-seek, and she usually wins."

"And Miss Dalton?"

"Oh, she is Muriel's aunt."

"And Muriel?"

"Is my wife," he said, between his teeth, the words sounding like a groan.

"Your *wife!*" The girl's eyes were wide with amazement. "I never knew you had one—indeed I supposed you the most bachelor of bachelors!"

"So I was then. But I married soon after I arrived in England." He sighed heavily. "You see, we had broken sixpences when we were boy and girl ten years ago, and though I 'd forgotten all about it and her—she had n't. It was good of her to be faithful all those years, was n't it, Elf?" he asked miserably. "And she 's far too good for me, and awfully pretty. I 'm a worthless, unthankful brute. So of course we were married, and her rich uncle—who 's a poisonous beast—lent us this cottage. I 'm *sure* you will admire her," he went on desperately, "and think how lucky I am. She 's awfully good at saving and housekeepin' and makes blouses that look as if they came out of a shop—they do indeed!"

"How clever of her—I wish I could! If I tried, people would say they or I had come

out of a lunatic asylum! Congratulations, Mick. You hardly deserved such faith!" She turned her eyes away from his miserable face, knowing full well that if he had not deserved his wife, neither did he desire her. She thought she saw the marks of deterioration already stamped upon his face.

She was horribly sorry for him. She had liked Mick Talbot better than any man she knew—and she knew a very great many. Her passion for her art left no room for any other, so that no man had ever won more than friendship from her. Between her and Mick had been the warmest, closest bond; perfect companionship and understanding, free speech and few reticences. Their minds had seemed the halves of a whole, and she hated to think her fellow vagabond had found so little in marriage.

"Are you a quite new husband?" she enquired with assumed lightness.

"Oh, no! November, and now it 's July! It seems a lifetime," he added simply. "But never mind all that. I 've got my old chum back, anyhow. How I 've wanted you, Elf, but you leave everything behind you save an address—and that sort of thing is only permissible in a man! We 'll be young and foolish again, and play 'picnics'—I 've been a thousand lately, and a nasty, snappy Methuselah, as Miss Dalton will tell you. Do you remember how the sun seemed to rise beneath us and turned even the sun blood-red, and the picture you painted. . . ."

"I had *such* a stroke of luck with it!" she cried joyfully. "Sent it to the Wayne Gallery, and priced it rather stiffly; they hung it quite nicely and some old dear bought it for a hundred pounds!"

"He was on the make—that chap!" said Mick quickly. "In ten years' time it 'll be worth its thousands."

Though he knew it not he spoke with the tongue of prophecy.

"I wish I knew who 'd bought it," she went on. "I 'd like to thank the blessed dear! Fancy a whole hundred pounds! I never dared ask as much before. People are so shy of strange artists till their names are made—and mine 's still in the making. But twenty-nine is not hopelessly old, and it 's going to be made, Mick, it 's going to be made!"

"I know that, Elf," he returned, without any doubt whatsoever, "and half the art world knows it too. The public are always the last to come in, but you 'll have them at heel before long, mark my words."

"I hope so. I 've got the picture started—but I 'm always so afraid of death coming and interfering. I look on the Great Enemy quite impersonally. I do not fear it for myself—I am nothing—only for my art. I simply could not bear it—to die before I had given out my best. After then it does not matter. Sometimes I get such odd presentiments. . . ." The light went

out of face and eyes, terror showed in them, and her beauty was eclipsed.

"Rubbish," he said sharply, giving her a little shake. "Here, where am I to put this thing? So you 're rich—*pro tem?*"

"Oh, *no!*" she exclaimed, almost thankfully, "the hundred went all-in-an-instant-minute at Monte Carlo. I just looked in on some friends in the neighbourhood for a week-end. Yes, I know I 'm an idiot—but you used to be another! As for people talking about my 'private income,' that 's silly. Nobody can have an income under a hundred pounds per annum, and mine is ninety-nine pounds, nineteen and eleven-pence to the exact penny, which of course does n't count at all, except there 's often nineteen and eleven-pence doing no good to be spent to make my bank-book even. It would be cruel to compel the bank people to balance nineteen and eleven-pence."

"So you leave them nothing to balance at all, and they endorse your cheques 'refer to drawer' or 'no account'!" he interrupted with a grin, "while you continue to regard the nineteen and eleven-pence as a widow's cruse!"

"I always envy the lucky people without an income," sighed Miss Elphenstonne. "They are spared the awful worry of trying to keep within it."

"Marriage," said Mick inconsequently, "is not *all* loss!"

"My dear Mick—of course not!"

"No, I 've got a comic pig, and a comic Mrs. Hobbs, an Aunt Susan and an Uncle William. Uncle William is a funny shape in front, Aunt Susan in the bog. I 'll swop you; what have *you* got?"

"Be a nice, serious boy till we 've got the tent straight!" she coaxed.

"I can't! I 'm bursting with joy and folly at sight of you! What have you got, be quick!"

"A nineteen and eleven-penny kettle and tea-pot, making perfect tea, a coffee ditto, taking hardly any room in pockets—you don't mind bulgy pockets, do you?—and a chafing-dish,—I forget how many nineteen and eleven-pences: it rings a bell when the cooking is complete, and you 've only got to eat it. American, of *course*."

"You 've got to throw in something extra for Uncle William," he declared. "I wonder if it 's a consolation or otherwise to know for a dead cert that however objectionable your own relations are, the ones you marry are bound to be worse. Two tents—more extravagances!"

"The wee one is the bed-room, the big one will form a sort of sitting-room studio. As I 'm here for months and have put all my available capital into the venture, I may as well be homey and cosy. A woman vagabond never travels as light as a man, you know. It would be against nature, unless of course she 's all vagabond and no woman, and I am not."

"You emphatically are *not*," he agreed, as he

dived into a long packing-case and unearthed a couple of Paris creations. "For the birds and beasts of the air to see and rejoice in?" he enquired, holding them up to view inside the larger tent.

"Two hours from London and a friend's house or two," she retorted. "One never knows, and one likes to be prepared! I love clothes with a dual love—that of an artist, and that of a woman. I 've *got* to have them somehow. Will the tents stand firm? It 's very exposed here?"

"In any ordinary weather, and we 're not likely to have a gale at this time of the year. I say, we 're getting on splendidly!"

They were putting their shoulders to the wheel with a vengeance; bringing order out of chaos, as is possible for people long accustomed to such ways of life, and soon they were able to admire the effect. Miss Elphenstonne had achieved quite a cosy little home: there was the big lounge sitting-room studio, and beyond it, when the flap was raised, a very little dainty bed-room. She showed him with pride and delight how two of her boxes made a chest of drawers, the other a wardrobe, adding, "American again."

"Have you had the sheets aired?" asked Mick.

Miss Elphenstonne laughed her elfin laugh. "Marriage and domesticity have taught you something, after all!"

"Sheets must always be aired," he persisted, looking very wise, "always! These don't *feel* it! Did you?"

Miss Elphenstonne, whose mother had died of consumption, was supposed to suffer the inconveniences of a very delicate chest. At the same time she had never been ill in her life, and laughed at Mick's insistence. "You 're positively old-maidish," she complained. "The washing people will have seen to all that."

"Will they?" he snorted. "Anyway, they may have got damp coming, so here goes!" And he tweaked them off the bed.

"Oh, Mick, and after our making it so neatly!"

"I did n't think of it then. I 'll get them aired at the cottage. Now come along and have supper with us. The pie will have been kept hot because I 'm extra disagreeable if it is n't. Mrs. Hobbs can cook when she 's neither getting drunk nor converted—though me she treats as my disreputable profession deserves. She boarded that awful Gunter lot and believes we 're all alike. As for you, my dear lady, you 're just one worse, an artist, and an artist from Paris! You will feel inclined to apologise for your existence before long. Come and sample her and her pie."

"But Mrs. Talbot——?"

"Oh, you want a formal invitation. Very well!" Gathering up the sheets, he darted out of the tent.

"The same old, impetuous Mick," thought Miss Elphenstonne, smiling, "but married to a tiresome woman."

Mrs. Hobbs awaited the return of the journalist

with interest. What excuse would he make? These writing-folk were so good at lying.

"Funny Mr. Talbot should 'appen to 'ave a new suit on to-day, 'im being so took aback by the lidy's comin'," she observed. "And such a little 'un too!" she added contemptuously.

Mick grinned as he entered to catch the last words.

"Who *is* your very odd friend?" Miss Dalton enquired of him severely.

"We were the sole inhabitants of a little Swiss inn for three weeks," he began.

"Ho yus!" ejaculated Mrs. Hobbs.

"And became great friends," he added. "She 's called the Elf because her real name is rather too large for such a small person—it's Isobel Beatrix Halliburton-Elphenstonne, and one takes three breaths and comes up to the surface twice before negotiating it. She 's an awfully clever, charming girl—and please will you have these sheets aired, and ask her to supper, Muriel? She won't come without a proper invitation."

"You don't *siy!*" remarked Mrs. Hobbs sarcastically. "Fancy turnin' particular *now!*"

"Is she any relation to Lord Elphenstonne?" enquired Miss Dalton, who knew the names, if not the faces, of most members of the peerage.

"Not near enough for it to be a nuisance," returned Mick impatiently, "or to count."

"That sort of thing *always* counts," retorted Miss Dalton, in her grandest tones. "One

naturally prefers one's acquaintances to be socially agreeable."

Mick cocked a satirical eyebrow, and decided that Miss Elphenstonne should be welcomed with open arms. If this was the sort of thing . . . he ended with a mental shrug, and said carelessly aloud, "As a matter of fact, her father, who was in the diplomatic service, was a younger brother of Lord Elphenstonne, and they make no end of her at the Embassies."

"Then she 's been presented?" asked Miss Dalton, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

"Oh, rather—lots of times! Whenever her stock of conversation runs short, she goes and gets presented. Awfully good idea, don't you think?" His tone was quite serious, as he added the last diplomatic touch. "She 's fresh from all the latest Paris fashions."

"Then she 'll know all about those sleeves!" exclaimed Muriel thankfully, turning to her aunt. "How very fortunate! Of course ask her from me. Shall I write a note?"

Mrs. Hobbs found herself with an armful of sheets pushed into her arms and a curt command to air them thoroughly. And the owner came from Paris—that haunt of gilded vice of which she had learnt more than enough from the Gunter set! It was obviously a city chiefly inhabited by other wives and other husbands, dissipated bachelors and foreign hussies, and if nothing good ever went to it, nothing less than evil ever came

out of it. And here was profligacy at their very doors, and being encouraged to enter them! She turned solemnly to Muriel—Mick had already gone.

"Mrs. Talbot, pause before it 's too lite!" she said, in truly dramatic tones. "She 's ugly and you 're pretty, but prettiness counts in every woman *but* a wife, and ugliness don't matter—in the others. Don't warm a serpint in your bosom."

But Muriel, looking at her fair-skinned, pretty reflection, laughed. Little, ugly, sallow, elderly Miss Elphenstonne a serpent! The idea even found out what sense of humour she possessed. Miss Dalton laughed too. Men were fools, but not as great fools as that. Besides, it was obviously one of those intellectual friendships which is one of the safest things in the world.

So, not because she was charming, distinguished, or even because her feet were on the road to greatness, was an invitation extended to Miss Elphenstonne, but because she was niece of a peer she had never seen or wished to see, had been presented, and was fresh from Paris fashions!

Mick gave his wife's message rather breathlessly, adding, "I say, Elf, are you *sure* you have n't an Aunt Susan?"

Miss Elphenstonne showed her pretty teeth. "I 've an uncle-one," she laughed.

"Let 's marry 'em to each other?" he suggested eagerly.

"Mine 's married. Oh, Mick, you 're as mad as ever!"

"Madder! The madman enjoys, the wise man endures! I made that up myself, and you 'll find it in my next book. Waste not, want not, is an author's motto."

"I bought your *Woodland Essays*," she said suddenly. "They were charming——"

"In parts!" His face clouded. "They fell short most of the time, but now you 're here I shall do something really decent. By the bye, did you also buy the *Doubtful Duchess*?"

"Of course I did—and laughed at its nonsense. Did you?"

"No, I contented myself with writing it—a large bank balance is the nicest, warmest cloak for shame!"

"*You!*" Then she laughed merrily. "You bad boy! Mick—you should n't!"

"Go on laughing—it 's like fairy bells ringing across the sea! You stole your laugh out of Elfland, sprite! Of course I should n't, but cheerfully became the Man Who Did, just the same!"

"Promise me to do something good, to make up for that hideous travesty?"

"But 'something good' does n't pay—the other does. At least has in this instance. I 've come off the heights since you knew me. It was a bit cold and lonely after your departure, and such a nice quick roll to the bottom! It 's rather exhilarating—till one fetches up with a big, big bump!"

"Have you started nothing?" she insisted.

"Well—my *Pagan People*, but they 've gone all wrong. So will Mrs. Hobbs's pie if we don't run for it. At any rate, I refuse to be despised by a mere gnat like you, and a penniless gnat, while I 'm a plutocrat of safely invested four-percents. and know what real superiority feels like. Come on, do!" He seized her hand, and, laughing like two children, they ran to the cottage.

As Miss Elphenstonne shook hands with her hostess, Mick—quite unnecessarily—felt sorry for his wife. How the Elf eclipsed her, made of her a thing of naught, put out even the beauty she possessed! And all the time Muriel was feeling sorry for the other because she was so little, so odd, so plain. Her eyes were arresting certainly, but Muriel did not admire them: they only made her uncomfortable. She certainly did not compare them, like her foolish husband, to the windows of a great soul brooding like the sea when it is neither grey nor green nor blue, but sometimes one and sometimes all three: the wild tangle of black lashes certainly caused her a moment's envy, but what were eyes without a complexion worthy of the name? What the value of a wealth of dark hair turning red in the light, when it was stained with destroying grey! How brown her skin, how wide her mouth, and how often she smiled—to show her teeth!

Muriel did not blame her; she would have done the same in her place! Only, what were perfect teeth after all? People could buy them and

nobody tell the difference. A complexion was different; that took no one in.

Miss Dalton, mindful of a peer in the family, decided Miss Elphenstonne was rather "smart-looking." Her travelling coat and skirt were undoubtedly well-cut, though a trifle too simple for the more ornate taste of the elder lady.

Mrs. Hobbs's thoughts would hardly bear translation. To come from Paris was bad, to belong to a peer's family almost worse. In her eyes, all those in high places who were not "Royalty" (and "Royalty" were to be blindly worshipped as gods) were "no better than they should be."

An M. P. was a man who "made his bit" by "perks," obtained by pocketing as much as he could of the country's taxes. He had his hand for ever in the till, but, as a licensed robber, was to be respected and envied. A baronet was a being with bold, black eyes and a sardonic smile—(Mrs. Hobbs was a great reader of "family fiction" and daily *feuilletons*)—his chief occupation being pursuit of beautiful, but virtuous, governesses or typists. A peer spent his time equally between Paris, Monte Carlo, the divorce court, and motoring over pedestrians. An earl was a veritable sink of iniquity, whose worst doings were hushed up by a bribed press. A duke was one with the devil—and the devil was not the blacker; therefore what hope for the well-connected Paris artist could there ever be?

So was the "great" Miss Elphenstonne weighed in the balance, and found wanting!

And she knew it too, for under the veil of her heavy lashes, her eyes twinkled outrageously.

This judgment was to her rather a delicious change, for the force of a very vivid and charming personality had made her greatly sought after in many circles—and circles that counted, both socially and intellectually. The daughter of a brilliant diplomat, received in the first instance for his sake, but welcomed the second time for her own, her social part in the cosmopolitan world was of very considerable importance, and more than once she could have married very brilliantly indeed. In the artistic world she was a less familiar figure but nevertheless admired both as artist and woman.

Esmerelda's verdict accorded for the most part with the other "ladies," for after a cool grunt of disapproval she moved haughtily away.

The tiny, exquisite hands of the artist with their vivid movements and rings of undoubted value, brought a frown to Muriel's forehead. "I should not wear bizarre rings like that myself," she said later to her husband.

He looked at the large commonplace hands of the speaker, but said nothing.

"It 's so conspicuous."

"She can afford it," he said curtly. "She 's lovely hands and exquisite, long, pink nails."

"It 's bad taste—and she must be very vain of them."

"She is—she 's a vain little person altogether," with a deep contented laugh.

"Vain! But of what beside her hands?" asked Muriel, in genuine astonishment.

"Are n't we always the vainest of what we don't possess?" he asked, with a grin. So Muriel did n't admire the Elf? He chuckled over the idea with inner enjoyment. How like Muriel!

Miss Dalton at once set herself to be agreeable to the guest. "And how is Lord Elphenstonne?" she finally enquired, with genial interest.

The girl stared. "Oh, do you know him?"

"I have never met him . . . personally. I hope he 's had no return of his trouble?"

"*Has* he a trouble? Is it his wife, or his son?"

"Surely, my dear Miss Elphenstonne, as his niece. . . . I was alluding to his constant attacks of appendicitis."

"Oh, that 's merely over-eating. At least so I have heard. I don't know the man myself. They say he 's fearfully dull. It was *my* father that had the brilliant mother, not he. *He* seems to have got all the family stodge."

Miss Dalton was genuinely shocked. A peer stodgy! "Surely you take some interest in your relations?" she managed to gasp.

"Why should I—they 've never taken an interest in me." The tone was rather frosty. "When my father died, leaving me an orphan

five years old, nobody would take me in at any price. They were very shocked because my father had died in debt—possibly they blamed me for that too. Anyway, they blamed my mother for being a nobody and poor—a nobody and rich would have been a somebody, you see. She added to her crimes by dying of consumption and spoiling my father's joy in life. So the *curé* took me, cared for me, sacrificed himself for me—to meet with much scandal when I grew to eighteen, and he was only sixty or so! His kind action quite prevented him dying in the odour of sanctity in the eyes of a certain *clique* there—though not a large or important *clique:* merely powerful enough to hurt to the death the kindest, best man that ever lived." Her voice shook for a moment, and her eyes blazed like passionate, green jewels. "Then he died . . . he left me what money he had to leave, and I followed my art and wandered about the world, but never had kith nor kin to trouble what became of me. I never remained long enough in England to make the personal acquaintance of any, though their criticism of my actions has been detailed to me. But then it takes a relation to achieve the greatest impertinences . . . !"

Mick kicked her warningly under the table, for she was quite forgetting her audience, and had already lost her temper. She recovered herself in a moment and said in her usual voice, "The dear old *curé*——"

"I trust he did not try to inculcate Romanish heresies!" exclaimed Miss Dalton.

Miss Elphenstonne turned such a blazing face upon the speaker that Mick created a diversion by smashing his plate, receiving reproof, but saving the situation.

As they rose from the table, Miss Elphenstonne found herself face to face with her Swiss picture, and uttered a startled exclamation. "Mick—*you!*"

"Did n't I tell you I had become a man of cautious investments?" he replied, in a low voice. "I speculated in a mine which turned out very much O. K. and I speculated in your picture which is going to be even more so—and you *know* it! Muriel, whose feeling towards literature, music, and pictures, is indifference combined with dislike, believes you pick up that sort of stuff by unknown people—and, by unknown, she means all but a few big names that even she has heard of—for the value of the frame and they thank you into the bargain. I prefer she *shall* think it, so please do not plunge me into a conjugal argument! She does not even know the very illegible scrawl you call your signature has anything to do with you. And if it is possible to know less than my wife, Miss Dalton wins the competition." Though he spoke lightly enough there was an undercurrent of bitterness and disgust in his voice.

Just then Miss Dalton herself swept forward,

and urged the visitor to the best chair and plied her with conversational matter. "Then it 's a long time since you were in England?"

"Oh, yes, three or four years, I 've forgotten which. I was in London last during the opening of 'The International Bazaar,' because I remember such an absurd person that came to the opening, and the mayoral luncheon afterwards. He was one of the numerous suburban mayors, I believe, such a funny, fat, pompous man, and he *would* shake hands with the Royal Duke and everybody else he could. He did not know I was only a struggling artist without an income or a status, or I 'm sure he would not have insisted on shaking hands with me too. But he did, and my hand fell into a trough of warm dough, and I could n't get it out again for ever so long! Yes, it would be four years ago. . . . I spent the whole season in London, but I 've not seen that dear city to speak to since. After I 've got through my work I hope for a late autumn month before returning to Paris *en route* for—goodness knows where!" She ended with a shrug and a laugh.

"What a strange life!" said Miss Dalton, and tried not to sound disapproving. "How you must miss a home, and all the sweet influences of a home."

The eyes of the two friends met, and a brief twinkle was exchanged. "Can one miss what one has never experienced?" asked the artist diplomatically.

"When it is such a thing as that," said Miss Dalton eagerly, "all the more, I think!"

"Oh, the Elf 's a bird without any nest!" said Mick carelessly, as he handed a cigarette across to the guest, an action that rather horrified the other ladies.

"How awful!" shuddered Muriel, for the words sounded almost terrible to her. To be a wanderer like this, no home, no chance of marriage—for who would want to marry anyone so queer?—nothing but a box of paints? A bird without a nest! How could the luckless woman seem so unconcerned about it, so resigned to her fate!

"We 're ready to perch on any bough, and let the wind swing us soundly to sleep," added Mick gaily, his dark eyes alight. "Bless you, we *like* it! Think of the snail with his house on his back—then think of the birds of the air, and pity 'em if you can!"

"Are you calling me a snail, Mick?" demanded Miss Dalton, in ominous tones.

"Of course not," he answered with more alacrity than truth. "I was only speaking in metaphors, meaning by snails those bound to the house and domestic cares. They don't get along very quickly, poor devils, do they?"

"Of course, that *is* different," conceded Miss Dalton, somewhat mentally confused.

CHAPTER XI

MICK IS LIGHT-HEARTED

MICK arose next morning with a beaming face and paid an early unconventional visit to Miss Elphenstonne's abode, poking his head into the big tent, and shouting at the closed flap beyond, "Get up, you lazy Elf, and bathe in the dew!"

"I hope I 'm not expected to take that literally," returned the girl, laughing as she appeared attired for a ramble, "though it would be delightful to return to pagan ways and days."

"There 's nothing to prevent us playing at it, at any rate," he said gaily. "What shall we do to-day? Shall I lend you Miss Dalton's bicycle? She 's still asleep."

"I 'll borrow it from the right quarter later on. . . Is that the pig farm you were talking about?" pointing to the building in the distance.

"It is; do you like pigs? I 've learnt an awful lot about them and know all their tragic stories. Let 's go and christen them accordingly."

He led her through the yard and up among the sties, stopping opposite the residence of a shiny

and very stout lady-pig—though many might have thought stout rather too mild a description.

"Bow your hardest, Elf," commanded Mick, "we stand in the presence of rank and power. Did you ever see a more duchessy duchess? You know you never did, not even at cattle shows! This lady never gives fewer than seventeen hostages to fortune, and is consequently rated accordingly and the admired and envied of all. Even Harrison himself kow-tows to her! She sneers at the less-successful—and commandeers their acorns. She does n't believe in the latest ideas of economy. Of course she takes precedence of all."

He stirred the mighty personage up with his stick. "May a humble admirer wish your grace good luck in all your ventures?"

The fat, shiny personage grunted contemptuously.

"A truly aristocratic scorn for commoners—but accepts their acorns graciously enough," commented Mick, as, in default of acorns, he dropped some collected scraps into the sty. With a jealous glance her grace raked them together and sat on them.

"A genuine regard for the rights of property," approved Mick, "or a real lady at a real lady's club with the newspapers."

"And that *hideous* little pig with the thin legs and great, bumpy forehead?" demanded Miss Elphenstonne, laughing at her companion's light-hearted nonsense.

"Hush! Your flippancy shocks me! You really must exhibit more—outward—respect towards your betters. No socialism here *if* you please! This is no less than the duchess's single daughter—and her forehead is brains, not bumps. We call her the Lady Ever-Leaner for reasons that are obvious. The Plain Ever-Leaner. Not beautiful; but intellectual."

"The poor dear," mocked Miss Elphenstonne. "Go on, oh, foolish one! Soon the spirit will wave its wand, and it will be breakfast-time and we grown-up. In the meanwhile . . . Who is the lovely little pig in *this* sty? She seems to have a great opinion of herself."

"Ah, *she* is beauty, not brains—and consequently may be permitted to buck a little! She 's Pretty Polly Perkins, the belle of the ball. 'Abso-*lutely* a nobody my dear, and *so* pushing! Really it 's extraordinary what Society is coming to these days!' There *are* whispers of a high alliance for Pretty Polly Perkins, and the Bacon-Factory for poor, plain Lady Ever-Leaner. Intellect is 'out' this season, positively *déclassé*. That 's the Pink Pigling over there, very young and innocent—or with the genius for seeming so! Innocence is quite *chic* this year owing to one thing and another; some people fear it 's really coming in again, and wonder what they had better do about it. Esmerelda, who is other than the name would lead you to suppose, exclaims like Byron, 'Oh, Youth and Innocence!' Oh, milk and bran mash!"

"You 're such an utter lunatic, Mick!" said the girl contentedly.

He nodded as he continued: "The Pink Pigling is a great rival of Pretty Polly Perkins, and they are just the *dearest* friends, if a bit scratchy at times—in more senses than one! Do you see that little one with the enquiring eye and inquisitive nose? That 's the Unsophisticated Pig, a *débutante* who has n't been 'out' very long and makes her elders blush for her—even Mrs. Pink-Un, who is thought rather coarse than otherwise. You should hear the Unsophisticated one at times! 'Positively, my dear, says the most *outrageous* things—so shocking and upsetting to the dear curator!' Fancy an Unsophisticated *débutante* these days! Really one ought to call her 'The Survival.' She is always putting her foot—her four pig's feet I mean—into it; then they find her out and push, and say it is n't fair: she 's taking the cake. That lady with the upturned nose and rollickin' Oirish oi, came over from Dublin the other day and is as Oirish as they make 'em—grunts with an accent and squanders her acorns. She 's Mrs. O'Grady O'Flannagan, and well—knows her way about! *That 's* the supercilious Lady Vere, next in importance to the Duchess; fifteen and a half 's her aristocratic average."

"Why a *half?*"

"Squashed! Sat on him! He was what they call the darrell, in the forest."

"Oh, Mick, she did n't really! How horrid!"

"Rather! Invariably: simply can't break herself of the habit; perhaps it 's 'bong tong' in elevated circles; rather classy, *I* consider. See that wee, funny, little pig over there? Quite too shocking to mention! Dare I, I wonder?"

"You might risk it," ventured Miss Elphenstonne.

"The scandal starts with the name—'The-One-Who-Was-Repudiated'; Repudia for short, sounds quite like the Roman Empire, does n't it? He might allow a real intimate to call him Puddy. It 's done, I believe. Now promise you won't be awfully shocked, but he 's no . . .mother."

"*Mother?*" exclaimed Miss Elphenstonne. "No mother!"

"Well, none that can—or will—be found. That 's where the impropriety comes in! Repudia is a foundling—Harrison found her. There are three ladies seriously involved, if you must have all the awful details,—the Duchess, Lady Vere, and the coarse Mrs. Pink-Un—it 's an aristocratic scandal and quite unfit for publication—so trying when one buys *every* paper published. These ladies were in a sort of three-fold sty with one trough and one slip leading to it—the letter-box, you understand—when one morning early they all found themselves proud parents. As the Duchess herself said: 'Look at it as you will, it 's jolly rum!' and it *was!* Well, *one* of the ladies found herself 'disgriced somethink cruel' by an infant the size of a mouse. He was too small to sit on

effectively, because the more she tried to come on to him with a bump she just came on to the stones, and found he 'd crept beneath them, so there you are! What was a real lidy to do under circumstances such as these? To 'save her face' she pushed him through the letter-box, and pretended she did n't hear a faint squeak coming from outside the sty. Such presence of mind! Never lose your head in an emergency, Elf! Then comes Harrison and finds the little darrell misery—like an unclaimed letter—squealing indignantly outside his maternal home. The three mammas looked at him with scorn, disgust, and amazement.

"'*Whatever* is it?' asked the Duchess, suddenly very short-sighted. I never saw anything like that before—thank goodness!'

"'Nor me, neither!' chorused both the other ladies, in one breath.

"'Plebeian blood always comes out in the end,' said the Duchess, for everybody knew the origin of Mrs. Pink-Un was worse than doubtful.

"'It does *that!*' agreed Lady Vere, 'poor little bounder—still what *can* one expect?'

"'I call you both to witness that nose bears no resemblance to mine!' screamed Mrs. Pink-Un.

"'I do not understand you!' said the ladies of aristocratic origin.

"'My nose never took an aristocratic turn. It 's quite short and straight. That horror's is long and thin and bendy.'

" 'Words, idle words,' said the Duchess.

"Then Harrison appears, and gives the Duchess first chance; *she* outs him with her 'hard, hard hoof.' Then Lady Vere—she hurriedly tries to sit on him, which is considered suspicious by the other two, missing him only by the narrowest of shaves. Then Mrs. Pink-Un is given a look-in —and makes a shot at eating him! Harrison puts him back time after time, but always finds him more or less mangled outside the letter-box. In the end, 'the little misfortune' has to be reared by hand, and there 's talk of selling him to a show, as 'the smallest pig on earth.' If he attains that elevated position, I rather fancy he 'll have three claimant mammas, and the services of another Solomon will be required. Like many small people Repudia is full of bounce, self-importance, and is shockingly egotistical——"

"Thank you!" interrupted Miss Elphenstonne, elevating her too-long chin and pretending deep offence.

"And always running about and refusing to take life easy," he continued unmoved. "D' yer see that rigid looking old gal yonder? I call her Aunt Susan, because she has n't got a waist in the right place either."

"Remember I 'm not encouraging you. I am really rather shocked."

"Better be a fund of amusement than annoyance," he returned. "Dessay we 'll find Uncle William before long. The houses of the gentlemen

are yonder. Walk up, *if* you please! Ah! What about this Alderman-pig for the great Uncle William; the first to begin, the last to finish. We 'll call now formally on the young duke. This marvellous castle is his, and he knows his own value, does His Grace! A fine young fellow, is n't he? So pink and perfect and shiny—and such a dream of a tail! Note the latest fashion in curls. Succeeded his brother— Poor chap, that *was* a tragic story if you like! He was no end of a dude—no show considered complete without him. Lent *cachet* to the most countrified affair! Got very fleshy—and made flesh the fashion. He was great enough even for that. One hot blazing day they came to hang a trophy of admiration on the walls of his house and what d' yer think they found?"

"I give it up," laughed Miss Elphenstonne.

"What do you think they *did n't* find then? Not the poor duke, only grease, and lard, and low disgusting things like that! A mystery to this day. He literally melted from the spot and no one ever saw him again. Another disappearance in high life—though his, to do him justice, was alone. Well, this duke became the heir then, and he keeps clear of too much flesh; has a positive prejudice against it. Has made it 'second-rate' this season. Pretty Polly Perkins, who is socially ambitious, has hopes . . . but competition is keen. 'So hard to get the dear girls suitably settled these days, my dear—that tryin' you

would n't believe!' Not for everybody are the acorn-leaves! This other gentleman is also of high rank, had it all his own way once, but has got to take second place now."

"And that other group of sties away there?"

Mick pulled a long face.

"Alas, little Jimmy and his ilk live over there. *Their* destiny is the Hospital where they are *always* cured, and unlike other patients never utter complaints as to the doctor who cured them, or grumble that his charges are excessive. Full of brine, little Jimmy. Everybody loves him, even you, Elf—at breakfast time."

"Oh, don't!" she shuddered. "I shan't be able to again. I hope poor Lady Ever-Leaner——"

"I should n't be surprised if after all her brains saved her bacon," said Mick shamelessly.

"I want to go home," said the disgusted Miss Elphenstonne.

"Before hearing about 'Mrs. Hobbs who 's due to be converted—into Best Home Cured'?" Then the careless *insouciance* died out of his face. "Here 's Muriel," he said tonelessly. "Wake up, Elf, the fairy wand is turning us back again into Cinderellas!"

"Where *have* you been?" asked Muriel, after greeting the artist. "Do look at your boots, Mick!"

Miss Elphenstonne, turning a little red, tried surreptitiously to get rid of a vast accumulation on her own.

"Among our fellow-kind," returned Mick. "I 'm sorry I forgot to leave your card on the dear, fat, cushiony Duchess with a record of seventeen."

"Seventeen *what?*"

"Infant pigs."

"*Really, Mick!*"

"Yes—really,"—purposely mistaking her tone—"for once I 'm not exaggerating, and once it was seventeen and a half—The-One-Who-Was-Repudiated."

Muriel shrugged hopelessly, and turned to the other woman. "Did you ever know anyone so mad?" she demanded.

"Nobody can be wise without a streak of folly, or really foolish without a streak of wisdom," said Mick, at once. "We 're all like bacon,—streaked, you know!"

"I 'm afraid this Miss Elphenstonne won't help to sober Mick," Muriel complained later to her aunt. "She seems to encourage him, if anything."

"Think of her bringing-up," returned Miss Dalton. "A Roman Catholic priest, and then knocking about in Paris by herself. What *can* one expect!" She was injudicious enough to voice something of her doubts to Mick. "I hope Miss Elphenstonne is quite—quite *nice?*" she asked. "Girls like that get . . . ideas."

"Awful things for a girl to have in her head . . . ideas!" retorted Mick, rather rudely.

CHAPTER XII

THE MAKING OF A COMPACT

THE coming of Miss Elphenstonne changed the whole face of the forest for Michael Talbot; it was all crimson and gold now, and full of singing birds. For a space even the siren voices were hushed, the dull ache of *die wanderlust* stilled. He forgot the haunted past in the present, and of the present remembered only Miss Elphenstonne and forgot Muriel. The secret love was his, and the boon of a perfect companionship, and it was only his good resolutions that trailed with broken wings. Save intermittently, his spirits were of the highest, and laughter lurking round lips and sombre eyes, made him good to look upon.

"Really, Mick, you make one think of the spirit of the morning," said his friend one day, "or of Lucifer before the fall. What are we going to do to-day?"

"Bicycle to the sea," he answered, instantly, "and picnic on its shores. Here 's Aunt Susan's bicycle for you—she 's got something wrong with her legs."

"I hope nothing serious?"

"Oh, I don't think so, I was busy getting out the bicycle and did n't listen, sciatica perhaps, or chilblains—anyway she can't use it for a day or two."

"Won't Mrs. Talbot come too, she rides?"

"She asked you to excuse her, the prospect of your company did not allure. I am a Trial, you know, and you a Problem."

"All right then," the girl mounted the machine with alacrity, but Mick, seizing her, demanded in angry tones what she was doing.

"Going to ride it, of course, silly!"

"Down a hill like that!" pointing in front of them. "You 're not going to kill yourself if I can help it; it needs a pretty expert rider to negotiate its twist and stones, and Muriel and I shine at the art, you don't. As a matter of fact, even I was nearly killed once, owing to the machinations of Esmerelda, who likes to get in the way, or put her snout through the spokes—and talk of the devil, here she is! No you don't, Esmerelda, our time is not yet!" and he thrust the indignant animal back into the cottage.

"I can ride down *now*—don't be fussy, Mick."

"And don't be reckless, my good girl," he restrained her forcibly. "I give you best at art, but you 're no cyclist and as reckless as they make 'em!"

They spun joyfully along exquisite forest roads coming at last in sight of the sea, and then by swift stages to Fawley. Here they got off, and

walked, for the road was beautiful, till suddenly on the shore rose the curious, round, grey castle of Calshot, separating Southampton water from the Solent. Once the blockhouse of Henry VIII. and a place of great strength, it is now only a monument of the need of a bygone age, and its garrison consists of a coastguard and a master gunner. It is said that it is the much discussed Cerdices-ora where Cerdic and his son landed in 495 with five ships, and found ten fathoms of water alongside the castle, and a view that for beauty can scarcely be excelled. Seated together on the shore at Eaglehurst they gazed at the pageant before them, and felt its meaning with every pulse of their blood.

To the East stretched the Hampshire coast, the harbour of Portsmouth, and its long bare masts. To the south, Spithead way, rode the long, gallant line of battle-ships, and round Cowes swept swift fleets of buoyant yachts. Lines of smoke hanging above the narrow strait spoke of news, or the merchandise of continents, while overshadowing all rose the Isle of Wight hills, soft green and purple, and full of verdant valleys.

"To me this is the fairest view in the whole forest," said Mick, speaking dreamily, at length, "for the movement of the world lies within sight, and freedom comes down to the shore. I send my soul aboard those crafts and sail to unknown ports."

While Miss Elphenstonne stared at the scene

drinking it all in, he lay close to her on the ground, and counted her mad tangle of lashes: it was an occupation that never failed of its fascination or its futility, for she always looked up just before he had got to the end.

"Now you 've made me lose my 'place' again!" he exclaimed, exasperated.

"What *do* you mean? Oh, look at that ship. . . ! Why do the dark sails seem to contain all the magic, the others to be merely beautiful?"

"Why do hatred and love grow out of such small things?" he returned inconsequently.

"'Life is too short for hate'," she quoted, "and too strenuous. So I don't hate."

"'But long enough for love'," he returned, finishing the quotation.

Her thoughts flew to a humble, French grave. "It is finished—for me," she said curtly. "I have my art."

"Is there nothing you would put before it?"

She stared in genuine astonishment. "What should there be? Surely, you don't mean a man!" she laughed amusedly. "Oh, you funny Mick! Why should I?"

"You might n't be able to help it."

"You forget, I 'm twenty-nine, and since my guardian's death it 's always been my art. I never wanted to put any of them in the picture at all."

"Any of them!" he echoed wrathfully. "Do you mean—*many!*" He glared jealously at the absent, dreamy face.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered indifferently, her eyes on the ships.

"Of *course* you know!" he said shortly. "Why be a hypocrite?"

"Oh, well, most of them are happily married now, I daresay, and very glad I did n't!" She hummed a gay little French tune.

"Glad! They 'll hate their wives!"

"Nonsense! Care differently, that 's all: probably they 've all been 'in love' a dozen times, and surely that 's the wisest way; many and often is the salt of life. I 'd rather have three husbands than one."

Mick turned so that he could clearly see the sea mirrored in the great, grey-green eyes, and—so it seemed to him—all the dreams of life worth while, there too, and smiled rather unwillingly. "Miss Dalton, like the circulating libraries, believes in one love, one life," he observed.

"How tiresome," said the other absently. "Making a sort of business of it instead of a pleasure—or a hobby. Because how can one be certain it 's the right sort of love till one's sampled as much as possible of the wrong? And it might be the right sort of love for the wrong person, or the wrong sort of love for the right person . . ." she ended, with a peal of elfin laughter.

"Do be serious——"

"Love is only a side issue of life—and never serious."

"Except when you get it yourself."

"Then take Punch's advice and 'Don't.' Oh dear, I 'd forgotten you were married! *Pardon!*"

"I had n't," he said sombrely, "and married to the wrong woman, Elf."

"People often think that, merely because they *are* married. She 's——"

"The wrong woman," he insisted doggedly.

"In that case to be pitied as much, or more, than you—don't be so egotistical, Mick!"

"There are people you can't make into tragedies," he returned. "Muriel is one of them. Nothing goes deep enough—there are no depths, only shallows: they don't become submerged; they merely wade. When the Water of Desolation descends from above, it runs off their backs. They get temporarily wet, that 's all. Muriel will get wet if I prove that ridiculous thing, a failure."

"I 'm sure all your metaphors are mixed and half of them Irish bulls," she returned, "but it 's too hot to think. Why do you say that about failure? It will be your own crime if you do fail—come, climb up a bit!"

"Come to the mountain-top with me then!"

Miss Elphenstonne bit her lips and spoke a little angrily. "What have I to do with that part of you? Every man must work out his own salvation. In Switzerland, you were all ambition and purpose. In your *Woodland Essays* the *spirit* is there striving for expression, but now you invite failure by courting it. I am disappointed in you, Mick! What has changed you so?"

"Marriage—and to the wrong woman."

"How you harp on that foolish string! After all, I 'm sure there 's nothing wrong with marriage as an institution."

"Better an institution than a personal experiment," he retorted, "and there are a lot of things wrong with it to my way of thinking, its permanence for one. I like your logic too—you, who have avoided the pitfall, and not entirely for lack of opportunity, I fancy?"

She ignored the implied question.

He tugged at her dress and repeated it.

Then her eyes twinkled, and her vivid smile flashed out, "I 've often thought it would be delightful to be married—intermittently," she owned, "just to go away on a congenial honeymoon when holiday-time came round, you know, and not too often with the same person!"

Mick joined in her laughter, then, mindful of stirring jealousy, said mockingly. "Poor little thing, it never had a chance, it had n't. Too wee to be taken seriously! It got left, it did! High and dry on the shelf! And now it 's nine-and-twenty and going grey and ugly and it 's No Go!" He tried to see under the lowered lashes.

Miss Elphenstonne went on calmly playing with the pebbles she had collected.

"How many were there, *if* any? To think the poor dear thing never got a chance of being a British matron and hand-in-hand with Mrs. Grundy—and that now, owing to age and ugliness,

it 's too late! Even Miss Dalton experienced the thrill of an engagement, only he went and got himself drowned at sea—the selfish brute! Well it can't be helped if nobody will propose to it, and I can't for obvious reasons. Poor little has-got-to be-spinster!"

Miss Elphenstonne was not smiling now, her slight form was drawn up rather stiffly, "There was one when I was seventeen, and about one for every birthday since," she said in clear, cold tones.

"Not for its *twenty-ninth* surely!" Michael affected incredulous amazement.

The girl flung down the pebbles and faced him with an angry gleam in her wonderful eyes, "There were *two* for that birthday—so there!"

Mick clapped his hands, "Oh, blessed glimmer of human nature! So you are not *all* artist, you have a feminine weakness here and there. And how many does your ladyship anticipate for the next?"

"None," she said, a little gloomily. "I shall be thirty; later if I want one, I suppose I shall have to do the hunting myself—and I never could be that sort of a female. Do you think Harrison will invite me to be a pig-lady?"

"What about . . . me?"

"A married man! I am not that sort of woman; if friendship is overstepped, I give them a quick *bon jour*." Her mouth hardened.

"And if I would not go?" looking at her intently.

Their glances encountered, steel meeting steel.

"Then of course *I* should do so," returned the girl formally.

"But you would n't be able to; your worldly wealth is invested in three months here."

Miss Elphenstonne digested this unpleasant truth in silence.

"Do you know how I discovered I had married the wrong woman?"

"I am so sick of the 'wrong woman'. Because you *were* married to her, I suppose."

"No, because I was n't married to . . . *you*. Oh, it 's all your fault, and you may as well know about it! I thought I cared for you only as a very dear friend, a very understanding comrade——"

"And you thought right. The other idea arose from the disappointment of finding that no man or woman can suit another in every need, every particular——"

"Yes they can—if they are the one man and woman. If they were you and me. I knew that the day I married—if only I had known it five minutes before! I never even guessed what had changed the world for me. It was your eyes that looked at me when we were alone together, your face that haunted me. I found my friendship for you was love on the top of friendship, than which love there is nothing greater—on my honeymoon! And when I tried to push you away, Elf, as God knows I *did* try, having decent instincts now and then, you would n't go. You 've got to burden *your* conscience with that, not mine—you would n't

go! You never will go now, Elf," he added, with a groan, "you 've become a part of me, are in everything I think or do. That 's how I know you are the one woman. God, if I were free! I 'd make you see it then, dear!"

Miss Elphenstonne stood up, looking rather tall. "That 's enough," she said. "Good-bye, Mick. I 'm sorry. I valued your friendship. There 's no room in either of our lives for the other thing. As we can't be friends, we must be strangers."

His face paled, "What do you mean?"

"What you compel me to mean;" her beautiful, imperious, little hands waved him back. "You have chosen; you have given me back my friendship . . ." She turned away.

"Don't say that, Elf, don't!" He spoke huskily.

"It 's your own choice."

"Name your terms then. You know I cannot let you go, half a loaf is better than no bread."

"Will you do your best to forget this brief folly, put it out of your mind, out of your life, go back to the old friendship?"

"It 's so easy to forget at a word, and conquer instantly at a command," he returned, bitterly, "but I must have your friendship. Will you give me that?"

"Friendship to its utmost limits," she returned at once; "now let us talk no more of a dead folly, tell me instead of your work; what are you doing now and how is it getting on? Every day you 've promised to bring it with you and read to me what

you have done, but you always say you 've forgotten."

He took a packet out of one of his large, loose pockets. "Remember, you have brought the thing upon yourself," he said, unfolding it, "and that I want criticism, not praise."

Miss Elphenstonne sat down with an air of relief. She had dealt swiftly and surely with more than one tiresome man, but that Mick, her greatest, most valued friend, should need the same correction was a shock, as well as a disappointment. She knew herself, at times feared herself, and did not wish to be plunged into the maelstrom of passion. She gauged Mick's wild, intense temperament pretty exactly. That the average marriage spells disaster to a nature which is not meant to be married at all, or only perfectly married, she very much feared. If only he had had a wife with a little more depth, one capable of understanding, capable of making allowances; such a woman could have made something after all of Michael Talbot. Herself one of Nature's Vagabonds, she understood what he must endure, tied as he was tied, tormented with ceaseless siren voices. She could recognise his recklessness, since she had only to measure it with her own. Neither stood quite where the average man and woman stood, neither had ever learned to count the cost, and both were too old to learn now. Such lives make their natures for good or ill early, and do not change, though they may modify.

He read well, and the girl listened with frank

delight. "Oh, Mick, that is really good, almost great!" she exclaimed, when he had finished.

"The 'almost' of everything," he said bitterly, "*almost* we succeed! *Almost* we find happiness! *Almost* we conquer the world—and ourselves! And in the end the world conquers us. You are too merciful though—for this is not even one of the 'almost'—it 's just a tangle of wingless words. The thing is exaggerated, in caricature, the sense of proportion lost. Now this, for instance . . ." he reread a passage.

"There is something wrong," she agreed thoughtfully, "something not quite true, not even just. Don't you think the traveller's mocking is almost spiteful at times?" and she suggested a few alterations.

"How right you are!" His strong brown fingers cast the MS. in tiny fragments to the four winds of Heaven.

"Oh, Mick, how could you! I did not mean that, and in parts it was beautiful!"

"In parts—possibly, but it 's got to be beautiful in whole, since it's to be your book, the work I shall lay at your feet. I shall call it *The Book of the Elf*, and if you happen to slip in—well you won't take up much room between the pages! I shall start with the moonlight scene and the mad gipsy woman looking for the god Pan, because she believes that should she live through the touch of his burning hoof, he will make a little hole in her heart and pour back her wandering wits. Only she

must not scream or cry out, though it will be like boiling lead, for thereby she loses her guerdon. Yet, all the while, she knows she 's mad—that 's her tragedy. The traveller thinks he 's sane—and that 's *his* comedy. Then, as she stands longing for the god, yet fearing him beyond mortal fear, the storm breaks, and she covers her face, terrified before its fury. It is Hell let loose among the trees, torturing them, twisting them. . . . She looks up with a moan, as a hand touches her, into the evil face of the man-brute who has haunted her and whom she has feared all her days! Her beauty has drawn him, and he cares naught for storm, or right, or wandering wits, but is filled with a ruthless exultation that at last the woman, whose beauty has touched him too with demon madness, is in his power. . . . Then, as he catches her shrinking wrist, the earth rocks before a mighty clap of thunder; there comes the crashing of trees, even the moonlight is set on fire, and the world eaten up by flames; so that there is only fire and darkness left.

"The woman feels a terrible burning on her arm, and the mad creature, thinking of the god Pan, sets her teeth to bear the agony. Alas! The pain is too great, and, with a scream of utter despair, knowing she has failed before the test, she falls on her face, as one dead. When she comes to herself, the storm is over, there is a great stillness, a great peace, and dawn is splashing between the trees. By her side is what has once been the man of her

fear—a blackened, twisted thing. On her own arm her sleeve is charred away and a great, agonising burn disfigures it. But how joyfully she bears the pain, since the god has touched her and made her clean! The shock and the burning have restored the wits that a shock stole away, wise men tell her, but she laughs, knowing better than all their wisdom, for she has felt the burning hoof of the great god Pan and lived! She knows now that the man-brute has not been wicked, only mad, and tells the traveller—who alone agrees with her—all her story. That 's the idea for the first chapter. Now to set it down so that it will not seem ridiculous." He wrote busily for some time.

Miss Elphenstonne cast a relieved glance at his absorbed face. "This is the man I know—the real man," she assured herself, "the other was only a passing phase."

At last Mick laid down his pencil and crammed the loose sheets of paper back into his pocket. "I 've got cramp," he said, "and I 've got an appetite with an edge to it! 'Genius has burned!' Now for grub." He unstrapped the basket from his machine and proceeded quickly to get a meal ready. He was very speedy, very handy.

"You 're in your right element now, O Vagabond of many adventures!" Miss Elphenstonne said approvingly.

"Adventures, there have been those right enough, some I wish there had n't . . . now—Elf." His face darkened with regret, and he

turned quickly away from young Gore's pleading eyes, eyes never more vivid, never more alive, than when they were dead. "To have missed out only *one!*" he cried passionately.

"You mean—the desert?" she asked, with a shudder, for he had kept nothing back from her. She knew the worst of him as she knew the best.

"I 'm a haunted, hunted man, and shall be haunted as long as I live, in dying, in death—! No words can measure the agony of it. And it was my own work."

"Oh, Mick, whatever you 've done, you 've paid."

"Every day of my life, I pay, but something tells me it is n't enough, never will be enough, that I shall drink of my cup not once but a hundred times."

"You are morbid, we will forget the past; I *forbid* you to think of it in my presence! All that you have seen and done is not grey, only a tiny proportion of it. Tell me instead of all the gay processions of life you have witnessed that I have yet to see. What a vast crowd of humanity, Mick; driven humanity, perhaps, some of it. All of them travelling their little separate paths, all of them thinking them so important—and only God knowing their end! I hate to think of valiant travellers falling by the way, of the pitiful close, the waste of great endeavours uncompleted, unfulfilled." Her eyes grew very tender and soft and wistful, and Mick's gaze, fastened on her,

seemed to read the procession she mirrored there. "Such babies, too, in the army, Mick," she said pitifully, "with such tired little feet—I 'd like to carry them all!"

He laughed in rude derision, "*You* carry even a full-sized baby, midget! Well, don't let me catch you at it, that 's all! But you are right," he added gravely, "it has got to make one sad, that long procession, so many would gladly drop out if they could, or dared. A long weary march of weary feet, some in the sun, infinitely more in the shade, and the close of the road hidden by the mist of hope—most mercifully hidden, Elf! Rather a tragic army in spite of its gay flags, with you and me there somewhere marching on, not knowing the end. You, with a gallant flag waving before the world, and I, with mine—*furled* . . . " and he ended with a bitter, dreary laugh.

"Don't," she exclaimed. "You make me feel sad when I only want to be glad, and it 's such a wonderful golden day and we have the sea and the ships ahead—and the cold chicken!"

"Bathos!" he exclaimed, "and an awful problem—how are we going to carve it? Shall we take a leg each and pull, you don't mind being uncivilised, do you?"

"I do in ways such as these, when they can be helped, and I saw the knives and forks under the basket. Let 's be civilised."

"You civilised—with those sea eyes of yours! Tell me something I can easier believe. You 're

not and you don't want to be, you are as pagan as *The Book of the Elf* is going to be! What do we owe to civilisation when it comes to fundamental things? It has given us morality instead of human nature—but even that is not always the success it ought to be."

"Don't let 's get abstruse," she implored. "Give me some chicken instead."

After they had finished a hearty meal, she commanded him to read what he had re-written. "But first bury the remnant of chicken," she begged. "It looks so indecent in its inadequate covering of flesh—and one hates to be reminded of the finished feast. Oh, Mick, you did *most* of it, did n't you?"

"All save a wing, a leg, and a few slices of breast," he retorted, as he hid it out of sight. "Do you really want me to read the new effort?"

She listened to his deep, pleasant, tuneful voice with sparkling eyes. "The same—with all the difference in the world!" she exclaimed, when he had finished. "I cannot criticise that, for it is great. Mick, you have everything before you; promise you will never turn back! How *dare* you talk of freedom lost when you possess that freedom whose gift is the key of the whole world! What do personal things matter—none can take away your store! Care for nothing else, live for nothing else, go on, and always on, follow your star, fulfil your destiny!" Her words rang out like a great clarion

call to high endeavour, challenging fate itself, and her eyes glowed with the light of obsession.

But Mick sighed. "The key that can unlock that golden store is not in my keeping," he said, "but your book, at least, shall be all you would have it be, though Heaven knows I am no genius."

"But your talent is great, and it will be the easier to succeed without. Genius is a master, not a servant," she broke off, impatiently.

"But a master worth serving—you should know that! If I had as much in my whole body as you have in your little finger . . . sometimes I can hate you for it . . ."

"Be more impersonal, your happiness and yourself do not really matter; that comes or goes as it is written it shall, and though all of us can change the road, few of us can change the end . . . only your work is your own, to make or mar with such tools as you have been given. *You* can carve your own destiny and thank God for it—but it is genius that carves you . . . " and she hid her eyes for a moment in something like fear.

"For genius, happiness is bound to matter," he contested hotly, "for it feels a thousand times more."

"Then it must tread down Satan under its feet," cried the girl hoarsely. "It must take the wider view. When is it born of happiness, of content? Are those satisfied to stand still, possessed of it? You know the answer to that. Genius is progress

in the highest sense of the word—and progress marches over the bodies of the slain. . . ."

He caught her hand, gripping it tenaciously. "Don't march so fast, Elf," he implored. "Your race is too swift for me, and I am being left behind, my dear. I bow to your Master—but I hate him, too. He is going to stand between us as he always must, between man and woman when only the woman has it. No wings for me, just a sense of words, an excellent talent. I ride my horse while your wings whirl you through space beyond my ken. Oh, Elf, don't be so keen to break away! After all, the laurel leaves have proved a crown of thorns ere now. . . . The thing is a curse, it's draining your life, your happiness, your youth . . . it is a Moloch which can never be satisfied, whose pitiless watchword is always 'More!'"

"If it exacts its sacrifices, I am willing. We pay for everything. I, at least, shall pay for that which is worth while."

"It is killing your womanhood."

"I hope so." She set her teeth.

"But it is not dead for all that—it will rise again and stronger than ever, and what then, Elf, what then? How many times can one tread down Satan under one's feet?"

"Unto seventy times seven—and seventy times seven again!" she answered passionately, and Mick said no more.

They rode home slowly in the sunset, very silent, both faces grave, and paused for a moment as they

passed the churchyard, perched at the top of a steep flight of steps, to note how the poppies had stolen from the neighbouring cornfield to riot here and there among the graves.

"How gay they are," said Miss Elphenstonne. "One cannot remember death. Look how they dance and curtsey in the breath of every wind! I should like to be buried where poppies blow, when my long journey comes to a close. Let 's stop for a moment longer."

But Mick, his face very dark indeed, had already drawn her away. "Have n't we been sad enough?" he demanded harshly, a sudden horror in his eyes. "Those steps have a hateful and awful fascination for me. It must be so difficult to carry a coffin up . . . and when the rain keeps falling on it. . . ."

"Who is being morbid now?" demanded Miss Elphenstonne. "Really, Mick. And you always used to make me laugh! I much prefer the jester to the pessimist. Oh, let 's laugh while we can, and eat, drink, and be merry lest to-morrow we die! If you knew how I dreaded death coming and interfering! One can fight every circumstance, but one must lay down one's arms before death. To die with what one might have done, would have done, unfinished! I simply dare not let myself think of it. Oh, fate, send me health, and strength, and length of days, and whatever the burden, whatever the heat of the day, I will endure to the end! Mick, I 've got *the* picture to show you. Oh,

help me finish it!" She caught at his hand, and he nodded his head, but did not speak. Her strength was so terrible, he feared it for her. The rack was nothing to her, only death appalled.

Just then, Mrs. Hobbs, coming round the curve of the road, found them standing hand in hand by the churchyard steps, looking at each other with an expression which baffled her, but which she concluded must be the acme of evil itself. She gave them the gratified glance of one who has foretold the worst and is going to be found a prophet, not without honour in her own country. She had her use, however, for laughter broke suddenly from Mick, and he dropped the girl's hand and mounted his machine. "Now her eyes will bore into our backs, and make us feel deliciously wicked," he said. "Can't you feel it?"

"I can indeed!" cried Miss Elphenstonne, the shadow passing from her face. "What a character she is! You must use her, Mick!"

"I 'm sure she reproaches Heaven in her prayers that fire delays so long to consume us! You, an artist, from Paris, related to a peer! I, a journalist and successful whisky-hider. What health can there be in either of us? Well, here's your tent. Now for the mysterious picture. Don't be angry if it 's too deep for me."

"It 's only just begun," she said unveiling it, "but what does it make you think of so far?"

"A mist—no, a shadow," he answered at once.

"Oh, Mick, thank you for seeing so soon, for it 's

hardly started! It 's the thing that is to make or mar me, for it represents my highest effort, and if it fails there will be none to blame but myself—and my own limitations. You know the lines '*The Shadow cloaked from head to foot that keeps the keys of all the creeds*'?"

He nodded.

"That 's the title. I want to show how many and little and foolish are *creeds*, and how great the mystical shadow that dwells behind with the attitude of him of whom it is said, '*I sit as God holding no creed, but contemplating all.*' There 's to be the great, arresting, veiled form looking almost puzzled, certainly with pity, on the heavy, curious keys of a thousand creeds. The keys will be of different workmanship but of the same size—because each is the faith of a man—the so-called heathen, twin with the so-called Christian. It 's a big subject, perhaps too big for me, but only time will show: at least it 's got to be done. I 've dreamed of it day and night for years, seen it so plainly, yet perhaps in the doing of it I shall fail; inspiration, without which there is no great art, will hide its face from me. Suppose I make just a chocolate box of it, Mick, just a well-painted 'clever' picture?" Her mouth twisted in anguish.

"You will make it as great as mortal can," he exclaimed, positively. "It will mean the laurel crown of immortality, Elf."

And such indeed it was one day to mean.

CHAPTER XIII

MR. HIGGINS AT HOME AND ABROAD

"TALKING about holidays," said Mr. Higgins inaccurately, since they,—or rather he,—had been holding forth on the delinquencies of the County Council, "I always think there 's a great deal in my own original idea—that husband and wife should take them separately. My argument is this: a hard-working man requires a thorough rest and change."

"Y–e–s," agreed Mrs. Higgins, albeit with reluctance. She dared not seem pleased at the prospect of her annual freedom, or Mr. Higgins would immediately platitudinise on the "oneness" of husband and wife, and insist on her accompanying him. That had happened once, and Mrs. Higgins, doomed to the day-long company of her pompous lord, had not found the change at all beneficial. If he needed a rest from a woman who had no other significance in his mind than that of the inferior vessel, who saw to all his comforts, as a duty and a pleasure, the far from enviable lady, for all her husband's wealth, required a rest to enable her to continue to endure. It was not that she actually

disliked her husband, though he got very much on her nerves, and there were times when she got much secret amusement out of him; but she was a small, delicate, highly-strung woman, and his loudness, his immensity, his vast egoism and pomposity wore her out. The annual holiday in her mother's very quiet abode was a thing she looked forward to from year's end to year's end, and she had never forgotten the martyrdom of the holiday in company with her husband.

She laid down her work, and bent her meek smooth head.

"I suppose it 's the eternal spirit of bachelorhood," she sighed.

"Not at all, Jane, not at all!" returned Mr. Higgins, preening himself. "There 's no cause for you to be jealous."

"I know," said Mrs. Higgins, grim irony in her downbent eyes. "But you 're a fine man, William, a man of the world too. . . ." She ended with a doleful sigh.

This comedy was gone through annually; it made Mr. Higgins very pleased with himself, and very determined to take his holiday alone. It also ensured his coming back in good temper.

He patted her condescendingly on the shoulder. "You need have no fear, Jane. What you say may be true or it may not be."

"Oh, William!" she interrupted, as expected.

"But I am not the sort of man to forget my legal, wedded wife."

"Perhaps not," she owned, "but I feel sure you must have the most awful flirtations at these gay places you stay at. . . ." She hoped she had now thrown sufficient sops to dare to venture to the point. "Where did you think of going, this time?"

"Not very far," he said consolingly.

Her face did not fall; she did not allow it to.

"What do you say to my looking up the love-birds in their nest?"

"Do you mean Muriel and Mick?"

"Of *course* I mean Muriel and Mick. I shall go to Totton station, drive straight up to them for tea, and have a look round their little place, while the trap is put up in the village. Then I will drive to the Compton Arms at Stony Cross—it 's not far—and stay there for a bit, and from there gradually do the round of the forest, staying at the various hotels and working back to Stony Cross on a farewell visit."

"It will be a very unexpected treat for them," said Mrs. Higgins. "I 'm sure Muriel will be delighted."

"It will give me a chance of seeing whether there 's anything in her husband, or not; he really seems to have done quite well—for a trade like that. I may be away some time, but I 'll let you know the day to get back here and have the house ready for me."

"They say the autumn tints in the forest are wonderful," said Mrs. Higgins eagerly—perhaps a little too eagerly.

"Oh, I do not know that I shall stay as long as that," he said, at once. "My duties may not permit it."

Mr. Higgins was not so indispensable as he thought, as his wife knew; but it would not have been her policy to hint at anything of the sort. She only sighed pityingly instead.

"Of course I may manage it," he said more eagerly. "After all, there 's no reason why a public man should be the slave of the public."

He spoke as one who governed a province.

Then he wrote a characteristic letter to his niece Muriel, who pounced upon it with delight, on its arrival.

"From Uncle William!" she said to Mick.

"What does he want?"

"Oh, he 's coming to see us—how splendid! What a chance! We must not miss it, Mick!"

"Which of the suites is to be prepared for *his* reception?" demanded Mick, with an ironic twist of his lip. "The back-kitchen?"

"Don't be silly, he 's not coming to stay. You forget he 's accustomed to every luxury; a place like this would not be *suitable*. He 's going to the Compton Arms at Stony Cross to start with, and is going to 'do' the forest thoroughly from every direction. He says he will drive up here from Totton for tea, and then go on to Stony Cross for dinner, that he 'll spend an hour or so looking round the cottage, and will you be at the station to meet him, and see there 's a trap?"

"An hour for the shooting-box! Let me see: that 's twenty minutes apiece for kitchen, bedroom, dressing-room, and back-kitchen—he might try a bath there if he finds himself with any spare time. You once expressed a wish that he should, you may remember."

"And Mick . . . pay for the trap; he likes that sort of thing."

"Had n't I better buy him something at the same time? What about a pennorth of humbugs done up in pink paper, or a button for the bottom of his waistcoat, where relations seem strained. Or a wreath of roses to drape round the mayoral brow. Let 's have a triumphal procession while we *are* at it! Remember he 's our benefactor and worth five hundred thousand pounds and a possible peerage. Let 's do the thing in *style!*"

"Don't be silly, Mick—besides he would n't *like* you to give him things! Oh, I do hope you 'll get on together. You 'll do your best, won't you?"

"You leave it to me," said Mick, "and don't worry!"

But perhaps the much-tried Muriel might be excused for worrying just the same. So much depended on Mick, and on his behaviour. If Uncle William thought he was a "waster," he would bestow no further benefits, and perhaps leave the waster's wife out of his will. If, on the other hand, he could be blinded as to the real Mick, and see only the ideal, he might prove a rich relation worth having! But Mick was so rude, so brusque, so

blind to his own advantage. He would n't care whether the great man liked him or disliked him. He had no reverence for anything, not even greatness; he was quite capable of making fun of Mr. Higgins to his face; he was capable of any enormity!

"If I could trust you this once!" she wailed.

"You leave it to me," he said again, and she had, perforce, to leave it.

She hoped for the best, but did not expect it. Probably the two men would arrive at daggers drawn. Then Mr. Higgins would say he had prophesied disaster all along, that Muriel had no right to have married such a person, that he had warned her (not that he had), and, since she had made her own bed must lie upon it. Then he would shake the dust off his feet, and the rest would be silence. There would be no further favours, no mention in the will. The poor woman fretted herself almost ill. If only Uncle William had suggested her meeting him, instead of the mad Mick! But he had asked for Mick, and would be offended beyond words if Mick was not there. He made it plain that he wanted to take the long drive in company with his nephew-by-marriage, to discover if there was "anything in him." And he would discover there was everything there should n't be!

While Muriel awaited the worst, Mick went off cheerfully to Totton, apparently quite oblivious of the critical importance of the forthcoming drive and visit, his thoughts dwelling on Miss Elphen-

stonne, and not at all on the vast Uncle William. It might have been quite an everyday affair, as Muriel said. It *was* an everyday affair—albeit a boring one! The graceless Mick even mentally arraigned the mighty visitor as "that fat old blighter" or "awful bounder" and did n't care in the least whether he found favour in his sight or not, but remembered he had practically promised Muriel to be on his best behaviour; he meant to be so, as far as it was possible.

On the station platform he found the suet-pudding lady with the long husband, and greeted both warmly. "I 'm meeting a relation by the London train," he volunteered.

"We 're waiting for our boy from school," said the mother, her face lighting up, "and do hope he won't have got into mischief on the way,"—adding, with a wrinkle of laughter, "He often does."

"Always," said the pessimistic father, but he seemed rather proud of the fact than otherwise. "He 's the most mischievous boy in the school."

"But the cleverest and most popular, and has no real harm in him," added the mother quickly. "Here 's the train. Oh, dear, what 's he doing in a first-class carriage——"

"And to that fat man?" concluded the long, lean man helplessly. "I 'm sure he 's put out with Tom."

"That 's my relative," said Mick, and opening the carriage door he hustled out the grinning boy,

who was swept away out of sight by his adroit parents, before the great Mr. Higgins alighted.

"I travelled down with an abominable little boy," said Mr. Higgins, very red and angry. "He had no respect at all for his betters, and no first-class ticket. He just changed, and behaved in the most impertinent manner. . . ." Mr. Higgins broke off here, for it was humiliating to think of the terms in which the appalling child had addressed him, and how, when Mr. Higgins had attempted personal chastisement, the little horror had butted him violently in the stomach in self-defence, leaving him breathless.

"I want to give him in charge," went on the insulted man. "Where 's a policeman?"

"There is n't one. What did the boy do?"

"What did n't he do!" choked the man of wealth. "I engaged a carriage to myself, and then, after the train became express, the little fiend crawled from under the seat—giving me a nasty shock—and offered me half a bun, a nasty, sticky, dirty bun. . . !" Mr. Higgins's voice trailed off with a gasp. "When I refused, he took it as an insult and called me . . . names. I told him I 'd have him put in charge when we got to Southampton West, and so I would, only when we got there he slipped away. Then last station he popped back into my carriage, asked for the policeman, and when, exasperated, I attempted gentle correction, he assaulted me, assaulted me most grossly. . . . As you may notice, I have not yet recovered my breath.

He is a little devil—a regular little devil, and there he is driving away now. Hi—you—stop!" Mr. Higgins waved an excited umbrella, while the trap containing the bad boy and his parents made a quick exit from the station, the boy grinning at his victim with a thumb to his nose.

Mr. Higgins almost relapsed into tears. "I 've never been so insulted in my life, never," he said brokenly; "grossly insulted, *I!*"

"This is our trap, all I could get," said Mick apologetically, helping the great body into place. "As a matter of fact, that unfortunate little boy is more to be pitied than blamed. His parents were telling me about him; he 's not entirely responsible for his actions when he travels, trains affecting his brain in the oddest fashion. If you 'd shut your eyes and taken a bite out of his bun, it might have been all right, but he cannot brook opposition."

"Taken a bite out of his bun! I told him what I thought of him and his filthy bun—the little fiend! And what he deserved, too! A third-class ticket and no excuse except that he 'always liked to travel first in reserved carriages with fat old busters'—'*fat old busters*,' Mick! He meant me! He said he 'told them things' and they gave him a shilling, sometimes more, though skinflints only 'stumped up' sixpence; that his parents were too poor to allow him much pocket-money, and he liked to save them expense! That he often did! I told him it would n't be money I 'd give him,

and he—assaulted me!" Mr. Higgins bent with a slight groan. "He said he always 'used his head in a footer scrum'; it was 'hard as bricks and no end useful'; and it *was*," concluded the poor man feelingly.

"You leave him to me," said Mick, feeling for half-a-crown. "I 'll give him something he does n't expect, and a jolly sight more than he deserves!"

Mr. Higgins eyed the fine, muscular figure opposite, and his eyes brightened.

"Give it him with my kind regards," he said grimly.

"I will," said Mick, and fingered the half-crown.

Mr. Higgins felt more soothed and satisfied, and as they drove along in apparent good fellowship, he decided that Muriel had, after all, not done so badly for herself. True, the young man's appearance was rather wild and unconventional, but he was good-looking in his way, had even a distinguished appearance, and he had been making money, though he was an author. A man who made money, no matter how he made it, must always claim a certain respect and consideration, and Mick seemed to have in him the elements of success. Therefore, Mr. Higgins, thinking afresh of how he had acted fairy godfather to this clever young man, became every minute more genial, almost affectionate. Indeed, he came near to loving Mick because he reminded him of the great generosity he had shown, the favours he had bestowed. Mick

made the great Mr. Higgins feel good, over-flowing with virtue and loving-kindness, and it was the most paying of all generosity, since it cost him nothing.

Dear young people—*lucky* young people!

If he had only had a rich and noble Uncle William when he was a promising young man! Mr. Higgins, though he had been a struggling young man (and a very plucky, worthy struggler indeed), never thought of himself as "struggling": the term lacked dignity; but always as a "promising young man." He had considered Mick as a struggler, but in the afterglow of generosity, he became almost another promising young man. Mr. Higgins was quite sure there *was* something in Michael Talbot, after all. He felt towards him as a man feels towards his equal, not in the least like one in the presence of one vastly inferior. "After all, there 's nothing like intellect," Mr. Higgins told himself complacently, "when one can afford to possess it." As a very rich man Mr. Higgins felt he could afford himself every luxury.

"This is No Man's Land," said Mick, at length, pointing out the village green. "There 's the inn where we will leave the trap; the cottage is just at the top of the hill yonder. Would you like to walk up it?" He had a merciful eye on the weary horse, and alighted himself as he spoke, an example followed by the driver, whose face fell as Mr. Higgins declared his intention of remaining where he was. Rich mayors did not walk up hills when they had paid to be delivered at the top.

"A stiff little climb," he beamed, as he settled his gross weight more comfortably—for himself. "There 's nothing like living high up."

"Nothing," agreed Mick pleasantly busily engaged in flicking the flies off the luckless horse. "Except, of course, residing entirely in the clouds."

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Mr. Higgins, ready to be pleased with everything. "Very good! Nothing like a sense of humour to lighten the load!"

"Pity it 's confined to the human world—if it is," returned Mick, with another look at the sweating, straining horse.

"Lightens the load! Oh, I see—quite a *double entente*. I must be careful, or I will be shocking Susan. How *is* poor Susan by the way?"

Mr. Higgins always spoke of "poor Susan," not only because she had not succeeded in getting married, but because she had not succeeded in marrying him. He could imagine no greater tragedy. His method towards her was reminiscent of one visiting the sick and afflicted. He truly sympathised with Miss Dalton in her irreparable loss.

"Ah, here we are at the top, or nearly. Which is Rose Cottage?" His eyes fell on the roomy farm in the distance.

Mick pointed to the poor little dwelling the rich man's generosity had bestowed upon him. "That 's it," he said briefly, and waited for Mr. Higgins's face to exhibit dismay.

But Rose Cottage, his one act of generosity, was

already glorified in Mr. Higgins's eyes, and it seemed to him a goodly place enough—for poor relations. "How truly rural, how very charming!" he exclaimed, quite sincerely. "What a perfect view you must have!"

"On to the pigsties, where we see nature unashamed, and, I trust, learn a lesson," returned Mick. "It is, as you say, glorious."

"And there 's a tent. Who is camping out near you?"

"An artist friend."

"How delightful! I must make the acquaintance of the young man and ask him to show me his pictures."

It never dawned upon him that the artist might not be flattered by this unprofitable notice, since Mr. Higgins scarcely knew a sunset from a cow.

"It 's a young woman, though," explained Mick.

"Not alone surely! What?" in return to Mick's nod, "but how more than odd! I hope Muriel has n't got too friendly?"

"Of course, when one has n't anything *worth* stealing, one *does* grow rash," agreed Mick. "Still, I don't think Muriel has ever left her alone with the wedding-presents or her silver-handled umbrella, and, so far none of us have woke to find our throat cut from 'year to year'!"

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Mr. Higgins. "What a sense of humour you have—and what jokes we 'll have together, but not before the ladies, mind, not before the ladies!" and overcome with the holiday

spirit he reached forward and dug his nephew-in-law in the ribs. Then he sobered again; remembered his great position, his great responsibilities. "I meant of course moral influences," he explained. "One hears these Bohemian women are a little . . . free in their words and ways, not quite good style, genteel, if you take me—though not of course anything *really* wrong. Still, I shall be delighted to make her acquaintance and view her pictures."

"You are quite too kind, Uncle William," said Mick, feelingly.

"My dear fellow, don't mention it! If we are n't put into the world to do good to our fellow-beings, especially our relations, what *are* we put here for?" And Mr. Higgins played absently with a non-existent Bible, his Sunday expression rising to the surface.

"I give it up," said Mick, shaking his head. "There 's Mrs. Hobbs coming out of the cottage to view your approach with curtseys to suit the great occasion. She 's no end of a character!"

"So handy for study!" enthused Mr. Higgins, determined to see good in all things. Did n't the lucky young couple also, indirectly, owe Mrs. Hobbs to his generosity?

"But unhandy for domestic offices at such times as she is either getting drunk or converted," lamented Mick. "However, she 's promised to do neither during your visit. She has the greatest admiration and respect for you, Uncle William, she has really."

"Not at all, my dear fellow, not at all!" cried Mr. Higgins, highly delighted.

"Some men," said Mick solemnly, "are born to be worshipped by women; it is n't their fault, they can't help it; it 's Fate, but it 's hard on the less fortunate."

"Ha! ha!" cried Mr. Higgins, beaming. "What a fellow you are for jokes. Not but what. . . ."

Mick nodded sympathetically, and no further words were needed. Mr. Higgins knew they understood each other perfectly; it was not a disagreeable sensation. "And is the interior equally charming?" he asked. "Dear me, how time flies. It must be half-past four."

"I think I 'll just fly on ahead and tell Muriel she can get the tea ready," said Mick, making a sudden spurt forward, and ignoring the fact that Mrs. Hobbs would have already made that statement. "You must be quite exhausted!"

As Muriel, still fearing the worst, and battling with a cowardly inclination to flee, not to, but from, the rich uncle, bent over the hearth, she turned to see her husband standing with well-acted pathos in the doorway.

"Muriel . . . !" he began tragically.

She did not give him time to continue. Immediately she supposed all her worst fears only too well founded. "Oh, Mick, what have you done?" she wailed. "Will he ever forgive you? You have offended him hopelessly, of course. I knew you would, even though you promised you wouldn't!"

"But it 's *he* that has offended me," returned her mad husband pathetically. "Muriel, prepare yourself for the worst! The rich uncle has brought us nothing, not even a cheese. I did think your relations—your wealthy relations—would *always* bring us something!" He sighed heavily.

Muriel stared at him in astonishment. "And all the time you 've been pretending you were n't mercenary!" she exclaimed, disgusted. "Really, Mick, I do believe you are the most contradictory person in the world! How can you be so expecting! Of course he would n't bring us things as if we were babies and looked for sweets in his bag. Is n't the cottage enough?"

"More than enough," he retorted. "I merely wanted the little more that is enough,—any old turkey he might have had lying about, or a bit of lamb, or the ham of a pet pig." He began to weep with awful realism. "Rich uncles *are* expected to have little trifles in their portmanteaux, but there was nothing—nothing, just shirts and waistcoats and things he told me to be sure not to mention before poor dear Susan. Why is she 'poor dear'?"

"She had n't enough to make it worth his while," said Muriel cryptically, "so Aunt Jane got him instead. Her's was ten thousand."

"Lucky, lucky Jane! And does she thank Heaven, kneeling, for a good man's love—of lucre?" asked Mick. "But about there being nothing in his portmanteau——"

"What do you mean? How do you know?"

The much-tormented woman wrung her hands, and her voice rose in panic alarm. "Oh, Mick, you never *looked?*"

He met the horror in her eyes with the simulation of a fresh burst of tears. "I only poked," he sobbed; "just simple little pokes, but it took ages to make even *one* hole. These mighty magnates buy the best leather, it seems."

"*Poked holes!*" echoed the appalled Muriel. She was startled, but was she really surprised? Could anything that mad, incomprehensible, erratic Mick ever did surprise her? And he had poked holes in the rich uncle's portmanteau!

"Not poked; perhaps that 's too crude a term. Let 's say insinuated . . . I insinuated an aperture . . . . there, that sounds positively genteel."

"Did he see? Did he suspect? Oh, Mick, how *could* you?"

"With the ferule of my stick, 't anyrate!" He took out his handkerchief again, "I 'm only a pore little nephew, ho yus, even nephews must live and *I* did n't butt him in the wind."

"Butt him! Did somebody *butt* Uncle William in the—the—" Muriel's voice rose hysterically, and she wrung her hands in agony of spirit.

"Oh, *hush!*" he interrupted. "What word were you about to use, and in connection with Uncle William! And he would n't have been butted if he 'd bitten the bun and handed over a shilling for being told things."

Muriel burst into genuine tears of dismay. "You 've gone really mad at last!" she trembled. "I always felt you would some day, but oh, you *might* have waited till after Uncle William's visit!"

Somewhat repentant, Mick sought hurriedly to apologise and explain.

"Only joking," echoed Muriel, fury in her eyes; "only joking—and about *Uncle William.* You 'll joke about God next!"

Just then Mr. Higgins himself appeared.

"Oh, you honeymooners!" he said, shaking an arch, but podgy, little finger. "Do you think I did n't know you 'd rushed off for a few fond words before the uncle should interrupt the billing and cooing. But don't mind me; I was young once myself."

"And not so long ago either, I 'm sure," brought out Mick, with a gasp.

"Ha! ha! Well, you 've made me feel like a chaperon—a regular old dowager."

Relief shone in Muriel's face! Mick had, so far, got on all right with Mr. Higgins, because Mr. Higgins did not in the least suspect his real character.

"A frisky one, then," said Mick, with a wink. "Not minding the care of a few nice young girls at all!"

"Oh, hush!" cried Mr. Higgins, delighted. "Really, my dear fellow, you go too far. The days of my youth are dead . . . dead . . ."—his face assumed the look of a man with a secret

sorrow gnawing at his vitals—"in a grave with other loves."

"One love and several graves, or a grave apiece for *each* love?" demanded Mick, aside, of Muriel, who cast an imploring glance at him.

"And then life 's never the same again," sighed Mr. Higgins, looking eagerly towards the plate of hot cakes on the hob. Yes, they were his favourite kind. How fortunate Muriel had remembered! These stiff climbs gave one an appetite!

And then Miss Dalton entered, with more colour than usual in her face, and she, too, thought of the might-have-been, but wryly, rather than pleasurably, like Mr. Higgins.

"My dear Susan!" he exclaimed emotionally, also perhaps a trifle thickly, owing to a large mouthful of hot cake. "And how are *you?*"

"As well as can be expected," muttered Mick quickly aside to the man who had blighted Miss Dalton's second hopes, and was far from unconscious of it.

"I am very well thank you," answered Miss Dalton, who still worshipped the great man at such moments as a desire to sting him for his perfidy did not reign supreme. "And how is poor Jane?"

"Poor Jane?" asked Mr. Higgins, affronted. How could the woman who had achieved him and his great position, be "poor Jane"?

Miss Dalton smoothed down her dress where it most persisted in rucking, and managed to imply much by her silence.

"She has gone for *her* holiday," he added, with a jocularity which sounded a little thin. "Poor Jane," indeed!

"To Manchester?" enquired Miss Dalton pityingly. "That 's the funny thing about provincial people—they go back and back and never shake it off."

She had planted her sting, pointed out to him that his wife was "provincial." Being parochial herself she could think of no greater slur than provincialism.

Mr. Higgins frowned. He had thought his wife stupid, and resented her obvious boredom at his blatant entertainments, but provincial! And women were so quick to find out the lack in each other! Whatever she might have been in a more congenial one, Jane was far from being a social success in his own particular set, and her husband had wondered at the reason of it. Now, the woman he had once thought of marrying had told him the reason in one awful word. On his return he would have to start and train Jane, get this terrible thing out of her, make her more creditable. "Poor Jane" indeed! And the awful thing was, that, though he understood the slur only too well, he did not in the least understand in what this dread provincialism consisted. Had she an accent? He had never noticed it. Certainly she did not clip her words as his cockneyism taught him to clip his, and she preferred plain colours to the vivid silks and satins that seemed more suitable in a rich man's wife.

She had no "presence," no sense of importance, and she had rather a disconcerting way of looking at his friends.

"How ridiculous!" he said, rather angrily. "And though it may seem odd to you who are so differently placed, a lady with such vast domestic and social responsibilities as Jane, needs a thorough rest each year, and it is at my express wish she takes it."

Miss Dalton subsided, crushed.

Then Mr. Higgins had finished his plate of hot cakes, and a kindlier mood came over him, and he turned suffused eyes of loving kindness and sentiment upon the whole world. All these people admired him, respected him, looked up to him; even clever, gay Mick was sensible of a deep obligation. He felt like an idol surrounded by devout worshippers, and very, very happy. The more he thought about his generosity, the more he loved it. Undoubtedly, only the highest, holiest joy came from doing good.

Mrs. Hobbs came out of the back-kitchen to enquire if more cakes would be wanted, and genuflected to the great man, and called him "your grice" when Mick grandiloquently introduced her as "our treasured chef." It was all very pleasant and homely.

"I 've dusted your photer regular, your grice," said the charlady excitedly, "an' it 's been a pleasure, it has that! If you 'll allow me to siy so, I allus 'ad an heye for a fine, 'andsome gent, an' bein'

a widow owin' to the act of God an' an emetic what was rigin', an' which me 'usband took, I feels it ain't no sin to enjoy it!" Here she genuflected again, curtsey being quite an inadequate word to describe her reverent obeisance, "An' though the photer was a treat, your grice, you 're a finer sight still." With which she disappeared precipitately backwards into the inner kitchen and shut the door before Mr. Higgins could make any reply, making a curtsey-exit.

"Quite a character, as you said," beamed Mr. Higgins to Mick, "but an honest, worthy woman, I feel sure. Now, suppose we do the rounds. Ha! ha! This is your chief sitting-room, I suppose; very nice too, I 'm sure; very nice. I 've often wished I could fly like a bird to a cosy little nest somewhere myself!"

Mr. Higgins had never consciously wished anything of the sort. He loved his big, ornate villa because anyone could see a lot of money had been spent on it, and it was the "residence" of a successful man. But, at this moment he was really wishful for a romantic cottage in the woods. "And that the back-kitchen!" he continued. "How delightful! So close, so compact, so convenient!"

"Very compact," agreed Mick. "From the first we never lost our way."

"Ah, you must have your joke,"—indulgently. "Well, well, youth and love go with high spirits." He sighed enviously. "And actually a bath put in! Now I call that a very neat idea, very neat!"

"So much neater than a bathroom," murmured Mick. "And so much more interesting for the passers-by."

"The blind 's all right now," interrupted Muriel, growing red at thoughts of the postman. "Will you come upstairs?"

Mr. Higgins went upstairs, and was more delighted than ever. It seemed just right to him. "No empty wasted rooms, such as I have to put up with," he concluded.

Then he took a short—very short—stroll on the moors, and again was envious of the lucky young couple. He had n't a view like that at home. Esmerelda grunted by his side, and he was affected almost to tears to think that he who had given these young people their all, had n't even a pet pig of his own: only sad memories, and a secret sorrow.

Thus, Miss Elphenstonne, returning from a sketching tour, met them and stared, as one seeing rather a dreadful ghost, at sight of the great Uncle William.

The necessary introductions were scarcely heeded. "My *dear* young lady," purred Mr. Higgins, who seldom forgot a face of any importance. "Why, we are not strangers *at all*, but quite old friends! Dare I hope you remember me as I remember you?" And the artist's small hand was swallowed in Mr. Higgins's doughy palm. "Have you forgotten the opening of the great exhibition four years ago? You were with the Comtesse de Malmédy, and the Royal Duke was there,—a delightful man. I had

the honour of a few words with His Highness. I shook hands with you, too? Dear, dear, this is very delightful!"

He forgot that artists could be rather shocking and Bohemian people, or rather remembered only that this delightfully original young lady was an intimate friend of the Comtesse and a niece of Lord Elphenstonne.

"I 've been hearing all about your naughty, unconventional ways," he said archly. "But I 'm not going to be hard on you—we must all have our little holidays at times, and you are such a travelled young lady!"

Miss Elphenstonne, her eyes twinkling, murmured something suitable, and fell back with Mick. "Oh, Mick, will they ever forgive me? The funny, fat mayor-person with dough for hands! They will recognise the description now, and I am lost. Let 's run!"

"See great Uncle William as fat or funny! My dear, silly Elfkin, not they! They see him as the Golden Calf, as a god, as something too great for Nature's daily food, and bow awed heads. You are safe, sprite. Is n't he too delicious? Let 's make a book of Uncle William! I want to tell you what happened to him in the train and all about our conversation since." And not without additions of his own, he retailed the day's adventure. They always laughed together, Miss Elphenstonne and he: so the bond was closer than she knew.

It was later than Mr. Higgins had intended it to be, when they got back to the cottage, and the sun's red glow, turning all that was unlovely into beauty, touched the scene with magic.

Mrs. Hobbs came out of the cottage, too, to gaze on the beauty of Mr. Higgins, and suddenly, they all fell silent before the curious hush of the moors. Not even the tinkle of a cow with a bell disturbed it, and the restless, galloping forest ponies lay down for a space. It was a moment of great peace, a moment for dreams.

And a little noiseless cloud of dreams hung above them and dispersed each to its dreamer. Mr. Higgins's rather prominent eyes lost their muffin-sentimentality, took on a glow,—a glow of passionate ambition: he thought of his possible peerage and more money, a great deal more money! His pulse quickened, he straightened his flaccid muscles; he was great, but he was going to be greater; he could feel it coming, had always known it. Even Jane's provincialism had not power to mar the perfection of that moment. He was young again; he was a god; the eternal conqueror.

Standing a little apart, Miss Elphenstonne saw herself endowed with health and strength and length of days, going on to victory, fighting but winning, the flame of her genius burning brighter, higher, as time passed, till at last it shone like a great, white light upon the whole world, and time could not dim it, nor custom stale . . . and saw her star ascendant, and knew it for the star of Destiny.

Mick, with his wild, dark eyes upon her face, dreamed only of her and of freedom; of wander years with the ideal mate; and had no thought of work or career; for work and career were incidents to Michael Talbot. But one curse lurked within him, a tiger insecurely caged, the unbreakable curse of *wanderlust:* the second curse of genius had not been added.

Muriel dreamt of a palatial residence, with men-servants and maid-servants and a smart crowd always coming and going; exquisite nurseries; exquisite dream children. Miss Dalton, of romantic possibilities even yet, for it was the hour of romance. She made herself queen of the brown doctor and his home; and buried, without remorse, the peevish invalid sister. The brown doctor, even then, riding home to the nagging woman who awaited him with fresh complaints, felt in the golden rose that after all, he was not too old to capture a little of the rose still. He had a swift and dying vision of a practice becoming a liberal livelihood; of being able to allow his sister enough to live on in a fashionable hydro at Eastbourne, such as she had always longed for; and of some vague figure dancing through his dreary rooms turning them to sunshine. But, apart from the fact that Miss Dalton did not dance, the figure bore no resemblance to hers. It was just an ideal, born of a rose-coloured cloud and the hush of the moors.

Mrs. Hobbs's Utopia was a place of unlimited

whisky for a week or so, and a new bonnet to get converted in, which would earn her the undying hatred of every female friend she had. There would also be a new, young, and handsome minister to convert her, and add to her other emotions a certain piquancy.

Wise Mrs. Hobbs to seek only the tangible, while others sought castles in Spain, building extravagantly! She alone was to grasp her dream in all its potent sweetness. Even Esmerelda was not to find her ambition—a place of filth and slime to wallow in; a trough that would never be empty; and complacent Muriel to let her wallow! For Muriel sternly forbade wallowing, and Esmerelda was fated to suffer all the pangs of Tantalus.

Then came the trap, and the refreshed horse and driver, and the great Mr. Higgins was packed inside in state.

"Don't give the man more than so and so," whispered Mick, naming a sum somewhat over the legal fare, and, rather blankly, Mr. Higgins said he would n't think of doing so. He had intended to give half.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO PERSONS RETURN TO YOUTH

FOR the best part of the week, Mr. Higgins shed the light of his countenance upon his admiring and devoted relatives, and worshipped somewhat ridiculously at Miss Elphenstonne's shrine; he classed women as inferior, mentally, physically, and, on the whole, morally, to his own sex; he allowed them souls, certainly, but smaller souls; as an adjunct to a man they had a certain use in the world, and some of them were even intelligent; but of single women over twenty-eight he most strongly disapproved; he spoke of them as an "unfortunate institution."

His flirtation with Miss Elphenstonne—for the girl most shamelessly encouraged him— opened his eyes to a rather surprising fact; that to every rule there is an exception. He graciously allowed to Mick that Miss Elphenstonne was this exception. She was the only single woman of thirty he had neither despised nor pitied. Had he been free, he would have bestowed his greatness upon the artist with no undue amount of condescension. The comedy was one hugely enjoyed by the artist, and,

as greatly if differently (for he did not know it was a comedy), by the victim himself. Muriel and her aunt were startled, and not quite pleased. Mrs. Hobbs found it no more than she expected, "men bein' men,—specially on an 'oliday," and Mick was furious. For once he did not see the humour of Miss Elphenstonne's joke.

"Really Elf . . !" he began one day, after witnessing the most flagrant of flirtatious passages. "How you *can* . . . ! A fat old fool like that!"

"I think you ought to practice calling me 'Aunt William,'" returned Miss Elphenstonne primly, "and being respectful. Dear Jane's life is not likely to be a good one—*his* wife's would n't. Think of me in welwets and a gold chain, as a mayoress!" She closed ecstatic eyes, "or is it *he* who has the welwets and the gold chain! Men are so selfish!"

"You said you never allowed married men to make love to you!"

"But I naturally excepted great mayors, Golden Calves, and Uncle Williams," retorted Miss Elphenstonne. "One does."

"He was only going to stay a couple of days, and he 's been a week. He 's really falling in love with you——"

"Can't you see the Mr. Higginses of this world never fall in love with anything but themselves, and their own greatness, silly Mick? I make him feel sentimental, and secret-sorrowish, and *naughty*. He also thinks he 's studying me as a new type.

He told me the other day I had rather revolutionised his ideas about women, and when I earnestly implored him not to become too anarchical, he platformed platitudes for ten minutes on the alien evil. Don't wrest my amusing toy from me, please."

Mick said nothing, but next day by subtle suggestions and insinuations, he tore a very reluctant Mr. Higgins from the attractions of the artist, and saw him *en route* for another end of the forest. Mr. Higgins believed himself to be going on his own initiative, as the wiser, nobler, course; there was his own reputation to be considered, and it was kinder to Miss Elphenstonne to leave her, before he had spoiled her life with the vision of the might-have-been.

Also Miss Dalton had hinted of a long-owed letter to Jane, and Mr. Higgins did not want Jane to know too much; he did not realise in the least that the woman he had married was also another exception, since she was uncommonly intelligent, and could have got real amusement out of the picture of her husband at the feet of a Bohemian artist.

So he departed sorrowfully, promising to return for a day before he left the forest, and purchasing one of Miss Elphenstonne's small sketches for its full price, which was not at all his usual way of doing business.

And Miss Elphenstonne spent the money on a very beautiful walking stick, with a carved gold handle which she had seen in Southampton, and had

Mick's name and "go forward" engraved on it, ere bestowing it upon the writer as a "birthday present."

"But it is n't my birthday," said Mick, after confused thanks.

"But it has to be sometime in the year—unless you were born on February 29th—and I never remember dates. And you will go forward, won't you, Mick?"

"Of course I will," he answered, for at that moment he felt capable of the greatest achievements.

There followed for a little space, happy, peaceful days of deep content, and for a time the fierce tiger within Mick, flinging itself against the iron bars of its cage, lay down in seeming slumber. And then, the truce ended, the imprisoned beast stretched itself, and its great yellow eyes blazed with that longing for freedom which is unquenchable, unappeasable, an agony. The jungle called, the taste of its own kill was on its lips, and it pressed wildly against those iron bars.

The room where Mick lay was bathed in moonlight, and he tossed sleeplessly, trying to stifle two voices that shrilled incessantly, one the voice of a human love, the other that of a wilder, older, more undying passion—the sharp. clear call of Vagabondia.

Like the poignant note of a violin, played by a master hand, it held him under its spell. It was surely the most drawing sound in all the world. It

calls to all, but few hear or heed, for there are a hundred things to drown the sound of it—success, ambition, love, responsibilities, struggle for a livelihood, household cares, the desire of a home. These are a vast octopus which says, "I will not let these people go." To most the call is but a broken melody, an intermittent fever, something that will pass, as the fret of youth passes, leaving the safer, more assured things. The note is stifled; coming ever more rarely, sounding but as an echo, till at last men even wonder what it means. But its votaries—or its victims—do not wonder: they know. It is Kismet. For it is in the nature of things that these worshippers are fatalists, since they come into being under the wandering stars of great fatality. Seldom they rule their own lives, they are the sport of Destiny, and Destiny is not kind to her children She loves them with a terrible, jealous love, and her determination, too, is ruthless and irrevocable: "I will not let these people go."

The impress of her fingers made an ugly, unhealing wound in Mick's heart, held him to his bondage; she would be kind, show him fair sights, teach him to see, to hear, to understand, if he obeyed her, but, if he looked back, she would beat him to his knees, and he would have to bow a bloody head. She would be more terrible than any human woman scorned, and, to the last farthing, exact her price! Vagabondia held him body, and soul, and spirit, and would hold him to the end. He had no lot

apart from her; he was foam of a turbulent sea breaking ever on alien shores, one of the wasted lives, the wastrel ones: yet not all wasted, since from him, and such as him, are sprung makers of Empire, and the long, lonely army of pioneers stepping gaily, gladly, willing sacrifices, into the insatiable maw of progress:

'T is theirs to sweep through the ringing deep, where
Azrael's outposts are,
Or buffet a path through the Pit's red wrath when God
goes out to war,
Or hang with the reckless Seraphim on the rein of a
red-maned star.

They take their mirth in the joy of the Earth—they
dare not grieve for her pain—
They know of toil and the end of toil, they know God's
law is plain,
So they whistle the Devil to make them sport who
know that sin is vain.[1]

The voice he loved, yet feared, sounded very clearly in the moonlit room. It was more than ever difficult to shut his ears to the pipe of Pan, playing in the night watches.

At the other end of the room Muriel turned softly in her sleep.

Had ambition stifled that voice for the Elf? Did she lie happily at rest or was Pan piping to her also?

Rest and the Elf! Incongruous terms! It is little rest such active brains ever know. The fret,

[1] Kipling.

the hurry, maybe the achievement, but never the peace of the world! Yet their desire never turns towards it, and they call it by the incongruous name of stagnation. They fly to grasp the shadow and lose the substance.

As he lay there, envying the free, Mick knew that it was inevitable he would some day go back. A wanderer he had lived, a wanderer he would die. The birds of the air were welcome to pick his bones. Muriel was an incident, no more; right and duty, but empty words. He would go back—and not alone. The Elf should give up her ambition, all that woman held dear, for love of him. He had the right to demand it, since his love was greater still. He saw her and himself setting forth, hand in hand, with their two light hearts, and seeing eyes, their faces towards the sun. There came vistas of swift dawns and roseate cities, of the magic breaking of the day over vast seas, of a little, dark-sailing ship scudding fiercely before the wind—"a wet road, heaving, shining, and wild with sea-gulls' cries. . . ." Yes, that was the road for her and for him.

The strong, hot air filling the room seemed to blow her towards him held in the arms of the south wind, then it passed, and she had gone, a shadow among shadows. The god of the South drifted lazily out, and the cool night wind came and dropped her by his side, and this time, for a space, the vision stayed. He lifted a cobweb of silver dewdrops from her hair where it was silver too, and

lo! it was warm and human, not elfin hair at all! Not as a will-o'-the-wisp, not as an elf from the merry, dancing, soulless land of elves, not as a genius, but as the woman Eve came to the man Adam in the first, fair garden of the world, without sin, without passion: with all the undimmed gifts of life. So that there was neither time nor space; just her and him; primæval man, primæval woman! And lying there, he swore to make that vision a reality.

He would not be too greedy; she had wandered for the sake of her art, as much as for love of it, and she should take her art with her still. He would not demand from her that which she loved with such absorbing love, even though it must always be his rival. She should lose nothing, it should be all gain, since what the world called honour was to them but the smaller, emptier thing. They would forget the world as easily as the world forgot them, as they wandered by Syrian seas, on the verge of the Rockies, in the midst of a desert—a desert which for them should blossom like a rose.

He saw himself after the day's journey, sitting by their camp-fire, saw the flames dancing in the Elf's strange eyes, and turning her hair dull red, felt her small brown fingers against his cheek. His head rested on her knees, his lips on her hand. What matter that outside the jackals called?

And then the tiger rose with a low, deep growl, and flung himself against the bars. "They yield—at last!" he cried in exultation, and then suddenly

sank back and hid his face from young Gore's eyes. "I am a cursed and haunted man!" he thought, in utter sickness of spirit. He had never been worthy of that noble sacrifice: the other man would have been of infinitely greater use, greater good, in the world than the man he had died for, but as Mick had laid the hewn body with its face to the East, he had sworn to be worthy.

There had been nothing of sin to regret so far, though much of wrong in heart and brain, but he knew, in that moment, that if he gained his heart's desire, and it was true—as he had been taught in infancy—that men rose from the dead, he might face, indifferently enough, the God who made him, but he would turn away ashamed from young Gore's eyes. At that thought he reached the lowest depths of all; he envied the complacent unthinking, his own eldest brother, his smug father-in-law, his wife's Uncle William. They were all so nearly bovine in their self-satisfaction and content. To be just a cabbage—surely that was the most blessed lot of all! If he had been Mr. Higgins, and Miss Elphenstonne had been Miss Dalton, what a lot of sheer, blank misery they might have been spared!

Yet he knew that, even if given the chance, he would still choose the depths, because there came now and again a vision of far, fair heights.

He thought of a road, not far away, bordered on each side by dark grim firs: how deep would be its allure on such a night! How silver the young

trees in the moonlight, how fairy-like the mossy turf! To think was to desire: he rose and dressed quickly, gripped by the gipsy longing to wander in the moonlight, and be alone with a perfect night.

A sudden sense of freedom and present content came upon him when he was out of the cottage, and his mood changed. He became careless, irresponsible—a vagrant child. Like a boy just out of cramping school, he became full of ridiculous antics, waved his arms, shouted, and ran as he shouted.

Quickly a voice answered his, and a small figure darted into the light.

"Hullo Elf," he cried gladly, not in the least surprised. Now that he came to think of it, he had known all the time she would be there. "Where are the other elves?" he asked joyfully.

"Oh, *they 've* got to pinch all unpleasant people's noses and turn the milk sour—it's *my* 'night out,'" she returned, executing a *pas seul*. "I have n't been to bed and I heard you shouting."

"How will the Williams and Susans account for their red noses in the morning, do you suppose?" enquired Mick. "But, I say, you 'll be catching cold. The ground is damp and you 've only got thin house shoes on. Let me go and fetch your boots?"

"Elves don't take cold, or have red noses."

"You chest is delicate," he spoke angrily. "I shall go for them." He was turning when she caught his sleeve.

"There you go—spoiling all the make-believe!" she exclaimed, in wrath. "And how can I dance a fairy-dance in great golf-boots? If you bring them I shall throw them straight into the pond—so there, Mister Mad Mick! How old are you to-night? I 've come *un*grown-up and am having my twelfth birthday. Dismiss the superfluous years and be thirteen, please!"

"Consider it done, O fellow lunatic!"

She caught his hand with a ringing, childish laugh, and he grasped it as the boy of thirteen might have done, and forgot she was a woman, he a man, and that he loved her with all his being.

"Come and roll down the bank," she commanded, dancing along by his side.

With wild shrieks of laughter and affected fright, they rolled down the long, steep, mossy slope, not once but many times, racing to the bottom.

Miss Elphenstonne was allowed a certain start owing to her inferior weight, then came big Mick shooting down with great velocity, and a mad tangle of arms and legs arriving at the goal. Insisting on a very long start, the artist usually won, but once when Mick had passed her and lay direct in her way, she deliberately propelled herself right over him and triumphantly reached the bottom first.

They continued to roll with great gusto, as if really twelve and thirteen, and a squirrel and his wife peeping out of their villa window watched their antics with shocked, bright eyes.

"In the middle of the night!" said the Mister.

"Just under us so that we can't sleep!" shrilled the Missus.

"Pair of ijiots!" cried both.

But the idiots did not care, even though their clothes were damp and torn and green, their faces scratched and far from clean, and the lady idiot's hair came down and fell over her back in heavy ropes and clung round her vivid, sparkling face.

"Of course, if an excuse *is* necessary, one *does* have one's hair down at twelve!" she announced defiantly.

"But not often so *far* down, I think," he returned admiring its splendour. "I say, Elf, what a Lady Godiva you 'd make! It 's as long as yourself, very nearly, and much thicker—by Jove there 's a squirrel, let 's chase him!"

The squirrel who had alighted from the tree entirely out of curiosity found, to his great indignation, that the "pair of ijiots" were pursuing him. At first he was annoyed, then the spirit of the night got into his head too, and he encouraged them in their folly. He would let them just *nearly* catch him—it was so easy to make fools of humans!

So wild, untamed humanity dashed after the tiny untamed beast, and it is impossible to say who enjoyed it the most. Perhaps the squirrel's eyes were the brightest, but Miss Elphenstonne's held most of laughter. "I nearly got the darling's tail that time," she panted.

"Funny little chap! He could go right up a tree any moment but prefers to egg us on. What will you do with him *when* you catch him?"

"Kiss him good-bye of course! I wonder what excuse he will make to Mrs. Squirrel. I 'm sure I saw her poking out an outraged head——"

"Done up in Hind's?" he enquired, mindful of Muriel, "and was that why she did n't come too?"

"No, my dear, she belongs to the world of common-sense, that was why. He 'll have to trump up some excuse, I fancy."

"He can always say it 's only just gone twelve, and that it was business at the office; but I should n't wonder if he was a journalist or a policeman, and as such beyond excuses!"

And so the game went on, very foolish, very harmless, very delightful to the players, who were oblivious of the superfluous years, till the moonlight died and the magic of the night died with it. Mr. Squirrel went home, and took his lecture with his head tucked in, affecting sleep, but his tail moved consciously now and then, when a home-truth hit the mark.

"Pa 's been going it again," whispered one baby squirrel to another, "and ain't he catchin' it just! You listen! There she 's begun at the beginning again!"

"But pa 's asleep," said the little he-squirrel foolishly.

"Much *you* know about it!" said his baby sister, in derision. "Wait till *you 're* married, my son!"

Miss Elphenstonne was white and weary, and the exultation had gone from her eyes, which were dark and heavy, when after a long retracing of steps, they reached her tent.

"It 's always the coming back which spoils everything," she said, a little crossly. "I 'm not twelve any more, but practically thirty."

"You 're tired, and I ought to be kicked! Yes, it 's the coming back, the consequences, so to speak, that sour the after taste! But sometimes it 's not necessary to come back, Elf."

She made an impatient gesture of dissent. Twelve can roll and ramble half a night, and perhaps feel no more than tired, but thirty is apt to be bruised, and sore, and even a little sick with fatigue.

"Promise me to stay in bed till noon?" he urged her.

Since she was aching in every limb, chilled to the bone, and could hardly stand for exhaustion, she naturally repudiated such a sensible suggestion. "Don't be so old-maidish," she said pettishly, tossing her wet hair out of her eyes, "It was entirely my own fault—and at least I loved it—while it lasted! Oh, Mick, imagine the faces of the relatives if they knew!"

Mick laughed long and loudly. "Which are the truly wise, they or we? They at least are good, according to their lights—even if it 's night-lights rather than the best electric, and at the best I 'm an outcast, and — what are you, Elfkin, but another?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and thought of the disapproval of her own relatives who had scarcely acknowledged her.

"Not but what I don't respect high moral tone, I 'm sure," grinned Mick. "Specially at a distance."

"There 's nothing more annoying than being *obliged* to respect people you don't like," returned the girl,—almost viciously. "You dislike them because you dislike them—but you hate them because you respect them! That is if you 're a little beast like me."

"I wish I were no worse." His face grew gloomy.

"Don't be morbid!" She spoke sharply. "Your view is too retrospective. How can you go forward when you are always looking behind? The past lies beyond control; the future at least is your own."

"And Fate's," he broke in.

She frowned. "I do not believe in fate. '*I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul!*' Those lines could inspire a log!"

"'Unstable as water thou shalt not excel,' was not written for nothing."

"It was not written for you, Mick."

"Oh, yes it was, and at times I see it only too clearly; it is the writing on the wall. I do not *feel* success; I don't even deserve it, for there are two things I desire more, freedom and. . . ."

"You court failure by gazing too long on its

face," she interrupted. "How can you be so cowardly, so poor-spirited! A great strong man like you, who never knows the meaning of an ache or a pain, what it is to be too tired to sleep! Look at the *Book of the Elf*—as you will call it—it 's growing day by day, it 's magnificent, great——"

"You are responsible for that book, not I. You inspired it; without you it would die. I wonder sometimes if it will ever be finished."

"You are unstable indeed, if you can talk like that, and I have been mistaken in you." Her voice rang with contempt. "But it is not fate that has hindered you—and to talk of 'fate' or 'luck,' is no excuse, Mick. Only yourself stands in the way of yourself."

He turned on her harshly, stung by her words, her tones, her scornful eyes. "You are well-named Elf, a thing without a human soul, seeking only to dance in the light, a will-o'-the-wisp that leads men to bottomless morasses, and laughs when they founder in its depths! You do not really understand, and you do not really care! You kneel but to one god, Art, Ambition, Success: Self! Self! Self!" The words burst from him in a torrent, passed beyond his control, and his face was ugly with passion.

"How dare you!" she gasped, amazement in her eyes. "Do you think I will listen to such things from you?"

She turned to go inside the tent, but he had seized her roughly by the arm. "You are cold

and heartless and hard as a frozen sea!" he flung at her through clenched teeth.

"A frozen sea!" her eyes darted fire. "Let my arm go!" She strove in vain to wrest it from his merciless grip. "Your comparison is simply ridiculous! A frozen sea!"

"Then I must find another. No sea, Elf, rather foam of the sea," and quoted bitterly:

"We take no thought of Heaven,
  Hell we shall never dree,
We are as light as foam-bells
  Blown off the Cornish sea.
Children of wind and water
  The fixed earth has no part
In us: our feet are wild-fire,
  And wild-fire 's in our heart!"[1]

"I hate you," said Miss Elphenstonne slowly.

"Oh, Elf, deny the wild-fire if you can! It dances in your feet and in your eyes, but where 's the key to a human heart?" His voice was sad and he let her go abruptly.

For a long moment she looked at his sombre, suffering face, then suddenly she held out her hands, and laughed. "Oh, Mick, what an unruly member is the tongue! Let 's say good-night before we say unforgettable, unforgivable things! I had forgotten twelve and thirteen could quarrel so easily, but they make up easily, too, don't they?" Her smile was very winning.

[1] *The Pisky People*, Norah Hopper.

"Oh, Elf, Elf," he cried chokingly, and for a moment he pressed his lips against her hand. "I was a brute, I did n't mean it! You are an angel."

"Heaven forbid!" she ejaculated.

"A dear human angel. Who could resist you?—not I. You play what tune you will and I dance to it! I shall always dance to your piping, Elf, no matter how clumsy my feet or heavy my heart—like the Pied Piper, you draw me after you as you will."

"Then I 'll pipe you to fame and fortune," she cried gaily.

"Teach me to forsake the substance to grasp the shadow," he returned, "so that neither in this world nor the next, shall I lay hold of either! Oh, Elf, you and I are shadow-seekers in a world that passes swiftly, derelicts who know no harbour. . . ."

"Hush, I hate you to talk like that!" and she shivered, not entirely with cold. "Now go, Mick, before you sadden me further, or before we quarrel again. I feel very contrary just now."

She stood looking after his strong frame till the shadows swallowed him up, and even then still stared out into the gathering darkness, her small face very drawn and pale. How grey everything had suddenly become, what a grey world it was after all! How quickly youth passed, while happiness was so far to seek, and the path of achievement so very steep and long!

She was not twelve now: rather many times twelve; a chilled and weary woman no longer

young, no longer invincible, no longer lit with the divine flame from within; she had never taken failure into consideration, but she had to take it into consideration now. She realised that if she lost that on which she had set her whole heart, there would be nothing left.

She shivered as an icy wind struck her, but still she stared into the shadows, the high flag of her courage lowered. Was Mick right? Were shadows all the realities he and she were to know? Did they follow the wrong gods? Had they flung away their birthright of careless, unthinking joy for this?

The hour,—when the sleeping world turns over with a sigh,—passed and still she did not move, still she saw Mick walking into the shadows, saw him swallowed up by the blackness. A horrible sense of foreboding shook her, like a hot knife drawn slowly across her heart. It was as if she was looking on his art in life, and found the sight an agony. Not for Mick darkness only, surely! In a little time the dawn would glorify the earth—and joy cometh in the morning!

Then, just as she was, wet and weary, she flung herself across her bed, and fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER XV

A MATTER OF CONSEQUENCES

MICK was rather late for breakfast, and Esmerelda eyed him disagreeably, as one who suspected the worst. The night's expedition had not told on the young man's iron strength; he ate rather more than usual, that was all.

"What a *huge* appetite you have!" remarked Muriel—not for the first time; it was rather an extravagant possession for a poor man, she considered.

"Yes," he agreed good-humouredly. "I 'm a pretty useful trencher-man. They called me 'The Wolf' at Cambridge. But don't worry, Muriel; from what I heard from my literary agent this morning I rather fancy we shall be able to support it."

While he talked to Muriel, he was thinking of Miss Elphenstonne, hoping she would stay in bed till noon, but doubting it. When did that active brain and body ever consent to rest?

"Aunt Susan and I are going into Southampton for the day," returned Muriel. "We thought we 'd ride to the station and get back in time for supper. Aunt Susan is going to buy a new coat and skirt."

"How awfully exciting! But why should she have all the fun? Buy one for yourself too, Muriel, and hat and blouse and everything you can think of to match. Get the best in the town, and send the bill to me."

Muriel's eyes sparkled, then her face fell.

"But ought I? You know, Mick, you are rather extravagant, and though I love clothes and *do* rather want a new costume, I 'd rather go without than buy what we can't afford."

"I thought women never really enjoyed shopping unless they were buying what they *could n't* afford," he returned, with a grin. "But we *can* afford anything in reason. I don't mind telling you I 've done rather well—financially—one way and another lately. There was that mining speculation, and another little flutter, and some writing stuff. I 'm a lucky devil when it comes to *money* . . ." his face clouded for a moment, for there had risen to disturb him a vision of the Elf dancing on the bruised leaves, the moonlight clinging to the silver of her hair. "Still one can't have *every* sort of luck," he added slowly, "and the majority would give their ears for mine. Most men make futile dashes after money; me it pursues. . . ."

"What do you mean?" asked Muriel, her eyes very bright with excitement. "Have you really made more? Oh, Mick, you are wonderful after all!" She caught his arm.

"I shall have ten thousand pounds securely

invested very shortly," he returned, "perhaps a little more. You can count on five hundred a year of your own——"

"You cannot mean it! How have you done it?"

"Oh . . . there are ways and means," he returned vaguely. "I 've got useful friends when it comes to speculations, and they don't mind me dipping in their lucky bag; then there 's a publisher-johnny—" He said nothing of a *Doubtful Duchess* now close on its sixtieth thousand, or of a *Doubtful Duke* already in the press.

"Then we may leave here, look about for a nice house?"

"In October," he returned (Miss Elphenstonne was to leave in October). "My affairs will not be settled before then. I am going to settle the money on you, and you shall spend it as you like. I—I may have to go abroad. . . ." He did not look at her.

This announcement caused her no grief. He had made money for her and could make more. She had not married a failure after all! Her friends would envy her when they knew. Five hundred a year for her very own! Regret stirred for a moment. It seemed such a pity she should be married to Mick; scarcely necessary now; free, and with that money she could make a much more congenial match. But of course it was too late, and, after all, he had given her the money to make her independent. It was very wonderful, very generous; and yet she could not care any the more

for him, which puzzled her. She was very pleased, even a little proud, but that was all. Mick was leaving her practically free, and if he went abroad for some time—and she hoped he would—there would be no disturbing influence in the smart suburban house. When they came together again after a little absence, things would be sure to go better between them. After a trip abroad he would of course settle down and be sensible—more like other people.

As soon as Mick had swallowed his breakfast, he went round to see if Miss Elphenstonne had obeyed his instructions to stay in bed; he was glad to see no sign of her anywhere about and to find the outer tent empty. Plainly she had breakfasted in bed and was even now asleep. He was turning softly away when he heard his name called in a low husky whisper; then followed a violent fit of coughing.

Without ceremony he burst into the tiny bedroom. He discovered the girl, still dressed, lying huddled on the outside of the bed, shivering with cold, her face livid, her eyes glassy and frightened.

"Oh, I 've got such an *awful* cold," she whispered. "My voice is almost gone, and it 's *my* nose that 's red and swollen not the uncle's and aunt's." She forced a very faint smile, but ended in a whimper. "I rather think I 'm going to die!"

"Still in your damp clothes, your wet shoes!" shouted Mick. "Good God, has n't even a

woman sense at thirty!" He was too much alarmed and annoyed with the girl's mad folly to be very diplomatic.

"I 'm twenty-nine," returned the accused, with husky indignation, "and I won't be called 'only a woman'!"

"'Even,' I said! Where 's Ma Bella? Has n't she been here yet?" "Ma Bella" they had christened the pretty, young, labourer's wife who came over daily from No Man's Land to make an early breakfast for the artist, and both had forgotten her real name.

"Her . . . sister 's . . . going . . . to . . . have . . . a . . . baby," panted Miss Elphenstonne faintly, "and therefore she cannot come."

"But Ma Bella can come—*she 's* not having the baby," fumed Mick. "Just like 'em—always making excuses! Mrs. Hobbs is as bad!"

"Oh, Mick . . . how funny you are!" The invalid burst into a fit of painful, husky laughter, which was succeeded by an exhausting fit of coughing.

"Oh, what a little fool *you* are!" he cried despairingly. "What 's there to laugh at? You *must* have your wet things off at once, and get warm in bed!" He was shocked at his own helplessness, yet he had acted nurse skilfully enough to a sick man more than once. "Have you a hot water bottle?"

Miss Elphenstonne, who lay more dead than alive, jerked her knees convulsively, but he

grabbed them firmly, "You 're not to laugh again—you shall not, Elf!"

"But you 're so funny!" she coughed. "Oh, dear!" she closed her eyes with a shudder, the spirit dying slowly out of her under waves of deadly nausea.

"You must get your wet things off," he said again. "Can you manage?"

She struggled to a sitting position, leaning helplessly against him, and looking very grey and plain and old. "I feel so sick," she moaned, "and I fasten at the back."

"That 's all right," he said consolingly, putting his arm round her. "After all, being married has its advantages. Muriel fastens at the back too. Now—one minute, dear."

She subsided, a backboneless heap, into his arms. "I 'm *sure* I 'm going to be sick—please go, Mick," she murmured fearfully.

"You 'll be all right when you 're safely in bed."

"But there are *millions* of buttons on this dress," she complained, "millions——"

"Oh, not as many as that," he said, a little ruefully, having contemplated a somewhat numerous array. "Surely, if Ma Bella can do them, I can *un*do them. When did you last see her? When is she coming? Where can I find her?"

Miss Elphenstonne was, however, quite beyond coherent replies.

Mick unfastened her dress skilfully enough, and drew it over her head.

"Now, old girl, there are no more back fastenings, and you can manage the rest even if you *do* feel sick and weak, if you make up your mind to it—and you 've *got* to make up your mind to it, do you hear? I 'll give you five minutes to get into your night-dress and bed." He put the night-dress by her side, and stood up. "Five minutes, mind!"

When he returned, Miss Elphenstonne was in bed, but almost on the verge of tears. She had never been ill or helpless in her life before, and the usual feminine spirit of stoicism was entirely lacking. Either Muriel or Miss Dalton would have made a braver and more patient invalid.

"*Five minutes!*" choked the victim of her own folly, "you 've been forty! But I suppose it would n't have mattered if I had died in the meanwhile!" She retired under the bed-clothes with an inelegant sniff.

"Died—from a silly little cold!" he laughed very loudly to hide his own panic-stricken terror, the invalid looked very ill indeed.

"I was getting Muriel's hot water bottle, for one thing—" he began.

"I don't want it," said Miss Elphenstonne, as stiffly as circumstances would permit. That Mick should go and leave her for ages, be so cheerful over her misfortunes, not really mind much whether she died or not!

Mick had, however, already placed it against the girl's icy feet, and a scream burst from the

invalid. "You 've burnt me," she said, with angry tears in her eyes. "Oh, I never knew you could be so cruel and *beastly*, Mick!"

Mick, who of the two was almost more to be pitied, grabbed the burning bottle, and looked helplessly round the room. He caught sight of a thick flannel blouse, and wrapped the bottle in that before replacing it in the bed,—this time a few inches away from her feet.

"Is that better?" he asked humbly.

She felt unequal to a reply.

"I made a linseed poultice too," explained Mick. "I found out how from Miss Dalton's *Enquire Within*. It was quite easy, and it 's hot as blazes too." He gave a little hop as he spoke, but certainly his bearing exhibited pride and vainglory.

"No, you shan't burn my chest too!" screamed the girl, in terror, retiring entirely under the clothes.

His face fell. "But I meant it for the best, Elfkin."

Miss Elphenstonne poked a scarlet, swollen nose from under the sheet. "Of course it does n't matter—as long as *you* enjoy yourself!" she said, resenting his cheerful attitude. "And I won't have that poultice."

"Oh, if you 'd rather not . . ." he eyed her warily.

She was lying back on her pillows now, and his quick eyes noted the fact that she had been too weary to fasten the neck of her night-dress.

With swift, skilful movements he clapped the reeking poultice on her chest, and then buttoned up her night-gown, and this time he had, perhaps a right to feel proud

"Oh . . . !" cried Miss Elphenstonne, with a wail of utter dismay. "It 's not the being burnt, but the smell . . . I feel ever so much sicker . . . *ugh* . . . !" Her face turned a deadly shade and she shuddered so violently that her long hair fell over her eyes.

"Poor babykin," said Mick very softly, his harsh, virile face strangely tender. His strong, brown fingers, willing if clumsy, twisted the long, tangled hair into a thick, uneven plait.

"That 's out of the way, at least," he said.

"Oh," wailed Miss Elphenstonne inconsequently, "how hideous I must be looking!"

"You 're feeling better!" exclaimed Mick, cheering up. Surely the awakening of vanity was a good sign!

"No, I 'm not," said she, offended.

"I 'm going to leave you for a bit, and fetch Doctor Byrne."

"I did n't know there was a doctor."

"Oh, Elf, I wish you would n't talk so much! It makes your cough worse! Of course there 's a doctor, not half a bad chap either. I 'll run round on my bike. It won't take long."

"Is he married?"

"No."

"Quite old?"

"Oh, anywhere from forty to fifty——"

"And passably good looking?"

"I daresay, but he 's a good doctor——"

"Then I shall want my night-dress with the real lace and pink ribbons," announced Miss Elphenstonne.

He gave an impatient laugh. "You women! What 's wrong with the one you 've got on? It 's a sensible-looking thing, just right for a tent——"

"That 's just what *is* wrong with it," she retorted huskily. "I want the one I bought in Paris and have n't worn yet. Get it out of the bottom drawer and give it me before you go!" She spoke as imperiously as circumstances would permit.

"I shall do no such thing!" Mick was really angry. "The idea of your changing, taking fresh cold perhaps, dislodging my lovely poultice——"

"Lovely poultice indeed! You would n't say that if it was on your own chest! It 's a perfect *beast* of a poultice!"

"Oh, you *are* feeling better!" he exclaimed positively.

"I 'm not,"she declared, even more positively. "I 'm worse; and I want the French night-dress." She pointed weakly to the bottom drawer of the convertible trunk. "Do you think I paid seven pounds for that night-dress for it to be wasted?"

"Seven pounds! Why *anything* does to sleep

in!" gasped Mick. "That 's real, wicked extravagance!"

"Anything to sleep in—unbleached calico I suppose! How like a man! If you don't get it for me I shall get it myself as soon as you are gone." Her lips set obstinately.

"Oh, very well—you little *idiot!*" He tore the dainty creation of the Rue de la Paix out of the drawer and almost flung it at her.

"And the hand-glass," she groaned faintly, between violent bouts of coughing, "and brush and comb, and ribbons in little drawer at the top, and that round silver box there . . . and put the dressing-table against my bed. . . ."

He could have shaken her, but instead did as he was told. "You can't really be feeling very ill, certainly not sick, or you would n't behave in this idiotic fashion," he insisted.

"But I *do!*" she groaned, truthfully enough. Then, as she saw her utterly repulsive image in the glass, she gave a gasp of horror. "Oh, I can't let a doctor see me while I look like this—wait till I feel a little better——"

But Mick—his patience exhausted—had gone.

That *Elf*—the genius, the great Miss Elphenstonne—could be so utterly silly, so cross, so unheroic! Elf whom he had deemed—and still deemed—superior to all women! And yet he loved her none the less for it, though she had made him really angry and impatient! The little idiot—the blessed little idiot! He obtained a promise

from Miss Byrne that her brother should be told of the urgent need for his presence the moment he came back from his rounds, and, much relieved, returned to the invalid with the good news. He found her—to a certain extent—transformed. She was wearing the exquisite French night-dress with a curious shade of pink ribbons which under happier circumstances was "her colour." Her hair had been parted in the middle and lay over the counterpane in two magnificent plaits, tied with ribbon of the same shade. She looked perhaps a little less appallingly hideous; one could not say more than that, and Mick saw no difference whatsoever.

He eyed her for some moments in stern disapproval.

"You 've been powdering your nose!" he exclaimed.

"It 's my own nose," she returned defiantly.

"Vaseline would have been more sensible."

"And make it redder and shinier than ever!"

That all this trouble had been taken for a strange man, made Mick suddenly sick with jealousy.

"Would it have made any difference?" he asked cruelly.

She glared at him. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and was silent.

Miss Elphenstonne snatched up the hand-glass, looked at herself, and laid it down with a shudder. "Dear Heaven, I look exactly like a sick monkey,

scarcely human, and as old—as old as the hills!" she sobbed.

Mick did not contradict her; her simile was only too apt. "But you are always the same Elf, to me, whether you 're looking beautiful or—or not beautiful," he said, laying his hand on hers.

She pushed it away. "Oh, say ugly, hideous, and be done with it!" she exclaimed pettishly. "What does it matter?"

"Not a rap," he returned. "One always looks bad in such circumstances. It 's expected of one, and the least one can do, but *you* seem to mind so dreadfully. And I never suspected you of vanity before!" he gazed at her, puzzled.

"Vanity! It 's merely self-respect," returned Miss Elphenstonne huffily. "Men have n't any. That 's all the difference."

"They don't rig themselves out for their doctors, anyway," he returned, with a jealous scowl. "As if doctors counted!"

"They count just a little when they are n't married," said Miss Elphenstonne wearily, "and if he 's nice I 'd rather he had n't to remember how hideous I *could* look, for he 'd never forget his first impression——"

"He 's rather stout, and—I should think—all of five and forty, and I imagine you might just as well have left the powder alone." He took up the silver box, examining it and its contents minutely as he spoke. "Muriel has some on the dressing-table, now I come to think of it, but she

says she only uses it to go to balls, and we have n't got any invitations—so far! Why is yours pink?"

"My skin is dark; your wife has a lovely, fair skin, and can stand white."

He sniffed at it. "It smells very familiar," he observed thoughtfully, and taking the puff proceeded absently to dab at his own face. Miss Elphenstonne watched him as unconsciously he covered his face with pink patches, and she smiled.

"Why, you 're better already!" he exclaimed, joyfully misreading her pleased expression. "It must be the poultice. Is it still warm?"

"If you look under the bed you 'll find out," retorted the invalid. "I was n't going to allow it to spoil my best night-dress. Yes, I really *do* feel a little better. Oh, Mick, how wormish you must have thought me at first, but I felt so weak, so deadly sick, so frightened! That sort of thing takes all the spirit out of one. I was *terrified!*"

"So was I," he owned frankly. "And of course it was all my fault! And then, my wife and Miss Dalton both being away for the day, and nobody to help us!"

"Are you sure Mrs. Talbot won't mind your being here?" she asked, a little awkwardly.

"Oh, no," he answered truthfully. "She won't *mind* in the least. She 'll think it odd, of course, and your taste odder, and Miss Dalton will say she does n't consider it 'nice,' and would be awfully shocked if she guessed about the poultice.

Personally I should have thought a poultice too unpleasant to be improper! Here 's Dr. Byrne, I fancy. I will go and explain."

Dr. Byrne's face certainly *should* have been his fortune, inasmuch as it never hinted to the most nervous patient that he was very bad indeed, though, on the other hand, when recovery was likely, it seemed to assure it from the first. Now it showed no surprise when a young man came out of an unmarried lady's room with smears of pink powder all over his face and coat. It might have been the usual thing. Inwardly, however, he was very much surprised to find the young man's manner so totally free from any embarrassment, from anything but anxiety, and a certain possessive air. Since he knew him as a honeymoon husband, the situation was odd, to say the least of it. He listened to Mick's clear explanations, and then went to see the patient, in whom already he felt a strong interest. Nothing escaped his notice—the powdered nose, the valuable night-dress, the gorgeous plaits! He could even imagine the invalid attractive when free from the disfigurement of a violent cold. Doctor and patient were friends at once, and Dr. Byrne showed himself in no hurry to go. His rounds were over for the time being, his surgery work two hours off, and he had only a dull, complaining sister, and ugly, bare house to return to.

Mick waited outside, his anxiety growing greater as the visit dragged on, and he feared the report

could only be very serious. Was the Elf dying? The world suddenly went black, and he drowned in smothering darkness. Then Dr. Byrne came out of the tent, and Mick, his face white and drawn, rushed at him. "Well?" he cried, seizing him by the arm. "What is it?"

The Doctor gave one quick look into Mick's betraying eyes, and then laughed easily. "My dear fellow, it 's nothing but a very severe cold—as yet—and need go no farther, with care. She must be sensible, and do as she 's told."

"She 's never sensible; she never does as she 's told," returned Mick, in despair.

"So I suspected! Wants to drive somewhat inadequate engines at full pressure, just so! Never rusts out. Well, if you have any influence you must make her obey me—frighten her into it, if necessary. I 've already succeeded in alarming her sufficiently to ensure her staying in bed for a day or two, till her chest is quite clear—it 's not a chest to be trifled with."

"Is she—is she very delicate?" Mick's voice betrayed him, if his eyes had not already done so, and there was anything left to betray to the sharp-sighted man opposite.

The doctor was pretty certain that his new patient would not make "old bones," but assured Mick that the delicate ones often lasted the longest—with care. "Only there must be care, no undue rashness, no overwork," he said, a little sternly. "What does this woman do? Is she a

writer? Whatever it is, she works too hard. I did not catch her name—if you mentioned it?"

"Miss Elphenstonne," said Mick, and burst out. "Work! She 'll never rest!"

"Not the artist?" Dr. Byrne's face lit up.

Mick nodded curtly.

"I spoke of her work before, how wonderfully good and promising I thought it."

"'*Promising!*'" Mick's voice was scornful. "It 's more than that: it 's genius, man!"

"A big word," said Dr. Byrne, almost warningly. "And used a little too freely among your world, I sometimes think. We have our famous writers and painters, even our *great* writers and painters, but there 's seldom more than one genius to one generation, and they don't always come to their own till another generation arises. . . ."

"But *she* will," said Mick certainly, "and you —you seem to know about art—shall acknowledge it too! Come quietly inside the outer tent for a moment, and I will show you the picture that the world is going to acclaim as a masterpiece. It is not quite finished, but it shows enough, I think," and he explained in a few words the meaning of the picture.

Then he took the doctor inside and removed the sheet that hid "The Shadow cloaked from head to foot that keeps the keys of all the creeds." Dr. Byrne's rugged brown face lit up, and for a long time he gazed in silence, while slowly the colour left his face. He did not speak, he was

moved beyond words, but he took off his hat, and stood silent for a long while before what was one day to be one of the greatest pictures of the age. Then they went slowly out.

"You are right," said the doctor curtly, "it 's genius—almost terrible—and genius is no fit occupant for that woman's frail body. As a doctor I can but deplore it; as a lover of art I can but bow before it. Thank you—I am glad to have seen it."

He mounted his bicycle and rode quickly home, his face very thoughtful. He had expected something strange in that tent on the moors; but he had not expected anything so strange as this; and there was much about the situation he did not like. Mick had no right to be in the foreground of the picture. It was not the question of morality that troubled him; rather the question of expediency. Mick could not help this greatly-gifted woman, he could only hinder her, perhaps even hurt her; make both the woman and the artist suffer. His examination had revealed much that he did not care about, especially in such a puny body possessed of the too-strenuous temperament. Health and strength and length of days, such as she had prayed for, would certainly not be the lot of Miss Elphenstonne, unless she turned over a new leaf. Dr. Byrne wondered if he would have the power to make her, and, because he knew his own limitations, doubted it.

"He 's quite a nice man," said Miss Elphen-

stonne contentedly, as Mick sat down on the chair by her side. "Of course, it 's a pity he has a beard. . . . What were you whispering about in the studio? I won't take a lot of horrid medicine. Do you think he 's more than forty-three? He noticed my hair and my night-dress, though, of course, he pretended not to."

Mick made an impatient sound. "Look here—" he began.

"And the curious shade of pink, I 'm sure he 'd never seen any the same before."

"Are you alluding to your nose? Or the powder?"

In revenge she held the hand-glass in front of his face. "Who are you to be superior about powder?" she demanded triumphantly.

He stared horrified. "And you let me go and meet him like that! What would the fellow think! Confound him, his face never moved!"

"He would think—if he did n't already know it—that vanity is by no means confined to the fair sex!" she retorted.

"Well, don't let 's quarrel." He wiped his face clear. "After all, it might have been ink or blacking! Now, Elf, I 've got to talk to you seriously. He does n't like your condition at all. He says you *must* stay in bed, and take every care till your chest is all right, if you don't want pneumonia or one of those things, and to be fed up and go slower afterwards in future. If you are good, you may be up at the end of a week."

"A whole week wasted!" her eyes were horrified. "And I 've never wasted a day in my life——"

"The more 's the pity!"

"I shall get up to-morrow and go on with *The Shadow*. A week out of my life—and life so short!"

"The fellow insisted——"

"He 's an unpleasant man, and I wish you had n't made him come!" she burst out illogically, "and I 've always disliked beards, always! Of course when people have silly little chins . . . perhaps he 'd lose his patients if he shaved."

"I showed him your picture," said Mick, with diplomacy. "He took off his hat, was struck all of a heap, and said you would be world-famous—if you did n't chuck your life away first!"

"I daresay his chin is quite nice," conceded the artist, with shining eyes. "Perhaps I 'll stay in bed for a day or two: perhaps I 'll go just a *leetle* slower, henceforth."

"Perhaps!" echoed Mick grimly. "When the devil is sick, the devil a monk would be, but when the devil is well, the devil a monk is he!"

"Well, it 's human nature," said Miss Elphenstonne, "and nothing is ever going to alter that, Mick?"

"Yes."

"He wanted to know how I got such a violent cold all-in-a-minute. Curious people doctors! My age too. Thought I was lying when I said twenty-nine and only smiled when I altered it

to 'nearly thirty.' He thought I was forty really. I look it—beast!"

"What did you tell him about catching cold?"

"Nothing. Did you?"

"I certainly did n't. It 's not his business how you got it. His job is to get you clear of it."

"But I somehow believe he suspected all the same."

"Impossible! Who would suspect a grown woman of such insanity!"

"He seemed an understanding sort of person. I don't believe I 'd mind him knowing—awfully. He would n't misunderstand, and he does n't belong to the race of Philistines."

"He 's a doctor, not a Sherlock Holmes," returned Mick, a little sharply, "and it 's unnecessary to imagine things about a commonplace medical man. Now you are laid up I shall bring my work here, and get on with *The Book of the Elf*. I hereby appoint you Listener-in-Chief."

"The cheapest, easiest obtained appointment in the world. I 'm not flattered."

"Oh, of course I don't mean this afternoon. You 've got to sleep this afternoon—doctor's orders—but for such times as you may—quite erroneously—fancy you are fit to be up, and are not to be trusted alone, I will distract your attention by making you give advice, etc.,—and now off to sleep with you, Elfkin! Tell me where I can find Ma Bella to bring her back at tea-time to 'rid-up,' as the saying is."

When he returned about five, Miss Elphenstonne had just wakened from a refreshing sleep, and was quite ready for her tea. Ma Bella got it, but found less than she had supposed likely for her to do.

"Lor', if all men were that handy!" she said admiringly, as soon as she was alone with the invalid. "There 's my brother-in-law what 's been behavin' like a zany all day, gettin' in the way as much as possible, an' at times when folks would n't 'ave believed as it *were* possible. That put out because of a babby arrivin'!"

"Is everybody all right?" asked Miss Elphenstonne weakly, interested. She had a distinct weakness for babies.

"Yes, Miss, an' a fine little thing it is, too."

"I suppose its mother would n't lend it me to play with while I 'm laid by the heels in this tiresome fashion?—but I forgot, I 'd give it a cold."

"Never you mind about *other* folkses babbies," said Ma Bella confidentially. "You get married, and 'ave them of your own. What a pity it do be to be sure that that nice Mr. Talbot ain't a single gentleman!"

Miss Elphenstonne laughed, amused. "I did n't know *you* were a match-maker, Ma Bella!"

"I can see when folks is made for each other, which is n't often, and which they never get together nohows!" declared the young woman briskly.

The artist lay silent, a puzzled look on her face. Then the pretty young woman, having brought in tea, departed for the time being, and Mick poked a brown face through the flap. "Shall I come and pour it out?" he enquired. "Are you nicely propped up, or shall I bring some cushions? What are you looking so thoughtful about?"

"Is n't it funny?" she returned. "When I feel awfully tired or achy or ill, I don't seem to want to be rich and famous or to work or struggle or be bothered at all. I just feel as if I 'd like a nice, devoted husband to look after me. Is n't it quaint!" She broke into a peal of husky laughter. "I shall begin to think illness changes one's character."

"If it makes you sensible that 's no disadvantage," he retorted. "We won't bother about fame or riches, you 'll just let me take care of you!" he caught her hand, pressing his cheek against it.

"Don't be *silly*, Mick." She dragged it angrily away. "And I said a *husband*. I did n't mean another person's. I meant my own."

His face went dark and ugly. "He would n't occupy that position long," he said ominously, the veins swelling suddenly on his temples.

"Now Mick . . . and you promised . . . you wait till I 'm ill, and can't run away, to take advantage. . . ."

"Oh, my dear, forgive me, forget it! Look, the tea is getting cold. You 'd better take it while

you can. The doctor said nothing about tea, and Ma Bella will have to try her hands on other diet, according to orders. The list sounded rather formidable, but Muriel and Miss Dalton will know."

He proved himself matter-of-fact enough, and the brief lapse was indeed as quickly forgiven as forgotten.

When he got back to the cottage, he found that the shoppers had returned, somewhat exhausted after the delights of the day, and he told them at once of the plight the artist was in, and that he had been with her most of the day.

"In her *bedroom?*" inquired Miss Dalton, in truly awful tones.

Muriel rushed into the threatened breach. "Oh, I don't mind," she said quickly; "of course I would n't do that sort of thing, it would be improper for *me*, but it 's not improper for Mick and Miss Elphenstonne, though I can't explain why."

"You are quite right, Muriel," said Mick quietly. "I shall do my work there till she is better; she helps one so."

"I suppose she really is *clever*," conceded Muriel. "I 'm sure she looks it!" This was not a compliment, perhaps, but certainly was not meant in any opposite way.

"Cleverness cannot excuse. . . *everything*," objected Miss Dalton stiffly. "It has always seemed to me that a woman should be modest, and a lady, first, and clever afterwards."

"Miss Elphenstonne happens to be all these—and a great deal more besides," returned Mick, in dangerous tones.

"She is just a flesh and blood woman, and you are a flesh and blood man, are n't you? And all flesh is as grass."

"But not necessarily *green* grass!" he retorted, with a gleam in his eye. That such as Miss Dalton should criticise Miss Elphenstonne!

Muriel hurriedly enquired what the invalid had had to eat, and announced her intention of making some broth and taking it at once to the tent.

She would have preferred to go alone on her errand of mercy, but Miss Dalton insisted on accompanying her. Miss Elphenstonne opened swollen and dismayed eyes upon the two visitors.

"It 's awfully good of you," she said, with an effort. She hoped they would not talk much, or stay very long.

They were, however, genuinely kind, and very sorry for her uncomfortable state. It seemed awful to Muriel to be ill in a tent; to Miss Dalton really rather more than awful, "not quite nice": though of course, the victim was to be pitied just the same; more, if possible. They were both shocked to see her looking so wretchedly ill—and plain. Their kindness rather overwhelmed the woman who could never have any kinship with them, for both wanted to stay and sit up the night with her.

"The loss of a night's sleep means nothing to me," said Miss Dalton eagerly. "I am very strong, thank goodness, and would only be too pleased to help in *any* way. It must be so dreadful for you!" She made the girl's pillows comfortable for her—if she did look disapprovingly at the French night-dress and ribbon-decorated plaits.

"Or I would stay," broke in Muriel. "You look too feverish to be left alone."

"You are far too kind to me," said Miss Elphenstonne gratefully, very conscious of not deserving much consideration from these people. "But really, I do not need anything more, and Ma Bella comes first thing in the morning. Mick will bring his work here too—if you do not mind?"

"Of course I don't mind," returned Muriel, with absolute indifference. "I only hope he will get on well with it."

"He is not really fond of work, I think," said Miss Dalton, a little acidly.

"But his work is fond of him," said the artist confidently; at which remark both women stared. Miss Dalton supposed the speaker a little delirious, or at least incoherent.

"Do you think his book good?" asked Muriel quickly. Something told her that the opinion of Miss Elphenstonne counted for much.

"Not good—great!" cried the artist warmly.

"I am so relieved," said Muriel, rising to go, "for when I married him he seemed to have no ambition. It was a great grief to me. I am not

like that myself. He just wanted to write things for *pleasure*—whether they would be popular or not, but I am thankful to remember I wakened his ambition."

"Of course," stammered Miss Elphenstonne, not looking at her.

The too women returned to the cottage most sincerely sorry for the artist's predicament. "In a *tent!*" murmured Miss Dalton. "I wonder what dear William would say to that! He seemed to think so much of her—or to pretend to. Fancy poor Jane's feelings if she knew he tried to flirt when he was away."

"Oh, not that—he was just kind and encouraging to her, and he 'd met her before," said Muriel very hastily, "and, of course, there 's nobody to tell Aunt Jane, fortunately."

"N–o–o," said the spinster reluctantly. "I suppose there is n't."

"I could n't have believed anybody could look so hideous and so old," said Muriel, at length. "Poor thing!"

"She 's a pagan, perhaps worse," said Miss Dalton darkly. "Her eyes . . . even when she 's ill, there 's a look . . . and then her night-dress! *Very* French, I thought it, and such extravagance! I suppose she put it on for the doctor—and he 'd think all the worse of her for it and ask if she had n't any Jaeger! If there 's one thing Dr. Byrne admires in a woman it 's *sense*—one sees that at once. I must say, that, though it 's very

improper for Mick to be running in and out as if he owned the place, it 's not *dangerous;* and you certainly have no cause to be jealous, with your looks. She was like a frog."

"Oh, I should never be that," said Muriel serenely. "Mick *may* be cold, but I was the love of his youth and manhood, the one woman in his life. But did you notice her hair? Of course it is splendid, even if the greyness spoils it, and when she has n't a cold, some people might think her eyes attractive, though to me they are far too odd."

"They are wicked eyes," said Miss Dalton decidedly; "and I always think there 's something about their expression, something . . . not quite nice."

CHAPTER XVI

INACTION

IT would not be true to say Miss Elphenstonne made either an obedient or resigned patient. She did neither, and was both trying and cross.

On the following day she felt so little better that she did not worry about being kept in bed, but, on the day succeeding that, she felt—as she expressed it—so much less "wormish" that she wanted to be up and doing.

She dare not, however, attempt anything of the sort. She felt like a very small and helpless person between two ruthless tyrants. Both were capable of keeping her in bed by force, and strategy was all that was left to her.

"Mick," she began coaxingly, after a brief preliminary skirmish, "do, like a dear, persuade Dr. Byrne to let me get up to-day."

"I 'm not going to teach the man his business."

"I 'd *feel* stronger up, I 'm sure of it."

"I 'm not."

"Well, I shall get up and see, anyway!" she retorted, with an angry glare. "Go away at once—I 'm going to dress."

But Mick sat stolidly on.

"Did you hear, Mick?"

He merely looked obstinate.

"Do you expect me to dress with you here?"

"I do not." He plunged his hands deep in his pockets, and made no attempt to move.

"I *ask* you to go—stupid!"

"You 're not getting up till Dr. Byrne gives you leave—if I have to sit here all day, or run off with your clothes. Now, do you understand? You 're just up against it, and have got two determined men to put an end to your folly, and the sooner you give in gracefully, the better for all concerned—especially yourself."

"I never guessed you could be so horrid," she said reproachfully, "and—oh, here 's Dr. Byrne!" She beamed upon the newcomer, and Mick, rather grudgingly, left them alone together.

"You are going to let me get up, of course," she said briskly. "Just a few garments and my dressing-gown, and to sit in a chair in the studio?"

"Not to-day, I think," he returned pleasantly.

"I *must* get up—I will not waste any more time in this ridiculous fashion!" exclaimed the girl angrily, sitting up in bed, her face brightly flushed. The exertion, which made her feel rather wanting in backbone, brought on a violent fit of coughing.

Dr. Byrne's keen, kind eyes smiled down at her; then, without ceremony, he thrust her gently back on her pillows, and drew the clothes up to her chin. "Now, are you going to compel me

to steal your clothes?" He laughed, but his eyes took in the disposal of her raiment.

Miss Elphenstonne unwillingly joined in the laugh. "You promise to let me get up as soon as possible?"

"The first day it is safe—I promise." And, sitting down by her side, he chatted for some time on the art which was so much to both of them. He came each day, and each day he seemed to stay a little longer—or so Mick's jealousy fancied. "He 's time to burn—that man!" he remarked rather savagely, on one occasion.

"An extra few minutes talking——"

"Looking at you, you mean!" Mick growled resentfully.

"And is n't it a doctor's duty to look at his patient?" demanded Miss Elphenstonne.

"He does n't do it as a duty——"

"Oh, you mean as a *pleasure!* How nice of you, Mick! Certainly I 'm not blotchy and horrid any longer."

"You are incorrigible!"

"I must have some relaxation——"

"I should not regard Byrne as a relaxation myself——"

"I regard him as a perfect dear," she broke in quickly, "and he ought to have a charming wife and half a dozen darling kiddies."

Mick's face went black. "Why not supply the deficiency?" he said fiercely.

"Oh, Mick, all at once . . !" She laughed

audaciously into his glowering face. "Half a dozen. . . ."

"I naturally only alluded to the wife-deficiency," he exclaimed stiffly.

"Oh, I see! Mick, do you know what I would love to have if I were married?" Her eyes were twinkling wickedly.

"A motor-car? A diamond necklace? What?" The ten thousand pounds was safely settled on Muriel, but there was an odd thousand over, and he could make more. It was extraordinary how easily one made money when one cared so little about it! The irony of things, he supposed. The Elf should have her motor-car or her diamond necklace. He would *make* her keep them in spite of any objections she might offer.

"You could have those without being married, silly," she returned. "I meant—twins."

"*Twins!*" he echoed, and, oddly enough, he was shocked. "*Really*, Elf! What next, I wonder!"

"Oh, nothing next; just twins," she answered drowsily. "A boy with a bullet head and dark hair, and a girl rather goldeny, inclining to curl, and with a dimple—a good start towards the half dozen, 't anyrate."

Mick only glared the more. The idea of Miss Elphenstonne married to Dr. Byrne was bad enough; to picture her the mother of twins infinitely worse. He felt sick—and savagely sick. "I 'd come and drown the lot of them" he said absurdly.

Miss Elphenstonne laughed at his rage.

"Marry the fool then!" he choked.

"Had n't I better wait till he asks me?"

"Who ever kept you waiting for that?" he demanded harshly.

Miss Elphenstonne, sniggering inelegantly under the bedclothes, made no reply. She was quite aware that it was both unkind and dangerous to tease Mick, but at times the temptation proved irresistible.

"As for—for. . . ." He broke off, stammering. "I—I did not know you could be positively indecent, Elf!"

"Do you consider twins indecent?"

"Certainly! And—here 's Byrne."

He did not rise from the chair by the bed. If the doctor had come to propose, he would not find it easy. He would be obliged to give up the idea, or do it before a third person. Mick was aflame with unreasoning jealousy.

Miss Elphenstonne, reading his intention, was intensely amused. The imp of mischief dominated her, and her small, elfin face was vividly alluring. "I shall ask the brown doctor," she said. "*He* will know. Doctors always know things. Dr. Byrne (as that person entered), Mick says twins are indecent, though he can't say why. *I* say they are adorable. Which is right?"

"They are very troublesome," said Dr. Byrne prosaically. "I should not like to have the care of them myself——"

Miss Elphenstonne caught a look of triumph directed at her from Mick, and had hard work to suppress her laughter.

"One of the charcoal-burners was thus enriched early this morning, and there were only clothes and provision—and that of the barest—for one; nobody to look after them and nobody pleased."

"I 'll sew them some clothes," said the artist eagerly. "I should love to. I 'm sure it should be easy—they 're so small! Are they a boy and a girl and do either of them dimple?"

"They do not," said Dr. Byrne laughing. "Frankly, they are miserable, sickly little mites and hideous to the point of repulsion."

"Would it have been any more trouble to have had pretty ones?" she enquired, with a great air of gravity.

The doctor laughed indulgently, looking down at his odd patient with intent gaze. What a quaint little body she was!

"I suppose you think a lot," said the girl, "since you say so little. Doctors are so dreadfully intelligent and so discreet! Are you busy this morning?"

"Not specially. I suffer from underwork, rather than from overwork."

"We must not keep you from your patients all the same," said Mick icily.

Dr. Byrne raised his bushy brows. "Ah! . . they can wait. In the meanwhile, will you kindly allow me to examine this special patient?"

"One to the doctor!" thought the girl, amused.

Mick flung himself out, doubtless regretting the loss of a door to slam.

"Well, you are rather slow, my dear lady, quite distinctly slow," said the doctor, after he had finished his examination; "but slow and sure goes all the way, they say." Yet he knew that Miss Elphenstonne was far from sure; and would certainly not go all the way.

"Do you mean I can't get up to-day?"

"You won't be running about in wet clothes for another day or so yet."

Miss Elphenstonne blushed. "I 'm never going to be silly again," she said optimistically. "It was lovely while it lasted, but the payment was too heavy." Her face shadowed suddenly. "It always is, I think."

He stared at the small brown hands aflash with their bizarre rings, and his own face grew troubled, for he was afraid for this patient of his, and she seemed more worth saving than many.

He dropped his capable hand over hers. "Don't buy," he said, in an earnest face; "then you need never fear to face the bill."

"Advice is such an excellent thing—to ignore!" she retorted. "And, you see, we only learn wisdom *after* the event, my friend."

"Perhaps because we enact the part of the Shut Eye Sentry," he answered, removing his hand.

"I suppose it would be all right to get up for just an hour?" she shot at him suddenly.

"We 'll see—to-morrow."

"With you it 's always jam yesterday and to-morrow but never to-day!" she cried indignantly.

"But it 's going to be jam on Friday if you 're good," he returned, with his full deep laugh. "The truth of the matter is, my jurisdiction is drawing to a close, and I cannot pretend to be a necessary evil much longer."

"You 'll come sometimes as a friend, if not as a necessary evil?" she begged.

"Yes," he answered simply.

"Mick and you have helped to make the time pass, but, of course, one hankers for one's work."

"Yet I wish you 'd remember that the spared horse goes farthest."

"You spell it *spurred*, of course?" she retorted.

"Not where you are concerned, though there 's a certain lady patient of mine who I wish *would* spell it that way. She sent for me to stop her getting so fat, and being troubled by a liver, but lies on the sofa half the day and eats the rest of the time. As yet there is no improvement—she ignores most of my orders—and she does n't think much of me as a doctor! She is, in fact, about to change me. Now I should like to roll the two of you together and turn out a medium person. You drive the steed far too fast——"

"I don't mind dropping in the traces as long as the journey is done," she said quietly. "It does n't matter—when the work is finished."

"Pardon me, but it matters a great deal. It

gives a lot of unnecessary trouble all round. Besides, no one's work ever is done, in this world, perhaps not even in the next—" He broke off with a little shrug.

"What do you really believe in?" she asked curiously.

"Little—but hope for everything."

Miss Elphenstonne rumpled her hair. "If there were n't so many roads, so many Gods—" she cried fretfully. "There 's the God of many, extremely British, and secretly anti-socialistic, a Being of vast tact, who will certainly not place madam and her butler together in the same mansion of the blessed, unless in their only possible relationship: a Being who will only re-unite the much married spouse to the favourite partner, and, while dealing punishment to our neighbours, will look lightly upon *our* little human weakness."

She looked up with her vivid smile. "He will have a very trying position," she added.

Dr. Byrne shook his head at her even while he laughed. "I should like, at least, to think there might be a Hereafter where one was paid according to one's efforts; not just enough for to-day, with never enough for to-morrow, you know," he said, slowly.

He wanted Miss Elphenstonne to know he was extremely, hopelessly poor; a man without a future, without a prospect.

Miss Elphenstonne's eyes grew sad and thoughtful. "Never enough for to-morrow!" she re-

peated. "What a large luckless army—and how horribly true in the art world as well!"

"If . . . the others could sometimes guess what it meant," he sighed; "not think it was want of push, of brains, or the will to work. But of course they can't. It 's not to be expected. One has to live like that to know."

"But you are clever," said the artist quickly. "The practice is poor and scattered and barren of honour or profit. Why do you stay?"

"It 's a living for my sister and myself in a bare way—and she 's an invalid. I have no capital to buy a better practice. I never had any capital, and—I am too old."

She was startled at that moment by his look of age. Yes, he was too old. But the tragedy was none the less a tragedy, in spite of the bright face he bore for the world at large. It was a tragedy too commonplace to be picturesque; and her heart was very sore for this kind good man to whom opportunity had never come. Then he saw the shadow on her face and dispersed it with rather a naughty little story, which he kept for his favourite patients, and Miss Elphenstonne enjoyed it hugely and wondered if she dare tell Mick.

Mick, thinking it was time the doctor departed, was even then returning to the tent, and hurrying along absorbedly had run—and literally—into rather an indignant Mrs. Hobbs.

"No heye for decent folk!" exclaimed the

assaulted indignantly, rubbing her arm. "Workin' too 'ard—ho yus!"

He apologised abjectly, and after accepting his explanation more graciously than he had dared hope, she eyed him up and down with ironic suspicion.

"Off to that there Miss Elfster of *course*," she remarked. "You always 'urry then, I notices, which men don't, not to their lawful married lidies. I 'ope she 's goin' on well, I 'm sure, it would be croil awkward if anythink were to 'appen to 'er, there bein' no other lidy livin' andy about, not related to a lord, nor a hartist from Paris, we all knowin' what that means. Not arf!"

The goaded Mick carried the war into the enemy's country. "By the bye, where 's that last bottle of whisky you—mislaid?" he enquired, wondering at his own temerity. Anything to keep her off the subject of the Elf!

"Me job an' for which I engaged is cookin', not whisky findin', which is your lot, and one you 're true to your tride at, Mr. Talbot! I wonders at you 'avin' the fice to make the delusion, I do indeed! Why can't they tax journalists? Such a lot of talk about this silly old budget an' things what ought to be taxed gettin' off, it's a disgrace, that's what it is. Honest 'ard workin' M.P.'s! *Ho yus!*"

"Then what *would* you tax?"

"Bachelors and widowers," she retorted promptly. "Why should men 'ave all the comfort,

I 'd like to know; and wimmin what do 'alf the work none?"

"By all means," murmured Mick, trying to pass.

"And I 'd tax gentlemen livin' promiscuous!" she shot at him, her respectable eye very grim.

"Do you mean harems?" he enquired innocently.

"I 'm surprised you 'd mention such things afore a decent woman— Ho yus, I 'd tax harems all right, though it might be a shock to *some* as I could nime, an I 'd tax clergy too, all of 'em, even when Methody, which is powerful rousin', for preachin' over ten minutes. I 'd tax twins an' prohibit triplets, which is a disgrice to a Christian country, *tax* em' three pound instead of givin' it has an encouragement, an' triplets would go out—you mark my word! An' there 's too many wimmin an gal babies, so I 'd tax em too, and *they 'd* go out, and spinsters like your aunt which has enough for an 'usband in an 'umble wiy, but don't keep one, an lemonide an' sick drinks as against natur an' never mentioned in the Bible which shows—" She paused for breath.

"What a revenue you 'd have!" he said admiringly.

"An' fat men and fat wimmin," she continued mercilessly, "because they tike up more 'n their fair share of room an' squash you in 'buses somthink croil though only piyin' for one seat, though not real gents or great mayors—an' yellow 'air

which is a luxury at any time, specially when the Almighty meant it for dark an' not for snares." Her mouth tightened. "An' I 'd tax dark 'air too when there was too much of it an' done in two great fancy plaits with pink ribbon. . . ."

Mick wondered how she knew. "Nothing would escape it seems?" he remarked, aloud.

"French night-dresses would n't!" she returned, with a snort.

His mouth twitched, but he did not laugh aloud. How amused the Elf would be! He was always collecting every amusing incident to tell her, and finding it doubly humorous when shared with her. "Some of these rich business men—would n't you bleed them?" he enquired.

"I would *not*," said Mrs. Hobbs emphatically. "They 'as *brains*. Business folks is them as sells somethink they 'ave n't got, to them as don't want it; and 'ave to be respected."

"I see," he said, and this time he managed to slip past her.

He met Dr. Byrne coming out of the tent, and nodded to him curtly. Then he asked Miss Elphenstonne's permission to enter, and retailed Mrs. Hobbs's conversation to her. "She must have peeped at you somehow," he added.

"I 'm to get up on Friday," she announced joyfully. "We 'll have a tea-party in the studio, and the best cakes that Southampton can produce. You and Dr. Byrne. Who else shall we ask?"

"That 's already one too many," he grumbled.

"Then you need n't come if you 'd rather not," she said innocently. And he had to make the best of the unwanted third.

On Friday, as soon as he had finished his lunch, he sought his hostess. "Please, I 've come to tea," he said, and exhibited a large paper-bag.

"At two o'clock!" returned Miss Elphenstonne, raising her brows. "If you come at two when asked for four-thirty tea, what time do you turn up for lunch, or breakfast?"

"I give it up," he answered instantly. "Would n't you like to look inside the bag? I 've been in every cake shop in Southampton and picked their choicest. Ingratitude, thy name is woman!"

"They are scrummy," said the artist, "and, after all, I only had a small lunch." She ate a small cake as she spoke. "Did you bring the *Book of the Elf* to read to me? I am glad it 's nearly finished, but there 's still the finishing touches to be put to *The Shadow*, and we agreed to finish on the same day, did n't we?"

"I will read it presently, and of course I won't finish before you, but I want to talk to you now."

"Oh, please read to me first," she begged, and, rather unwillingly, he got out his bulky manuscript.

They discussed the book for some time, then wandered off to other subjects, grave and gay and often inconsequent.

"Are you sorry your time of captivity has come to an end?" he asked, a little later. "Be a little sorry, Elf, for I have enjoyed looking after you, and having you at my mercy!"

"I can only be glad, though, somehow, this afternoon, I 'm rather in the blues."

"You with the hump—but why?"

"I have no reason, that 's the worst of it. I just feel as if nothing was worth while in all the world. *Is* there anything, Mick? Oh, dear, how silly I am! It must be sheerly physical!"

His fingers closed over hers with a pressure that hurt. "There 's love," he said roughly, "love that makes men as gods."

"And when the brief glory has passed, makes them but as men again—sometimes less than men."

"Don't say such things—love lifts us to the stars."

"Then flings us down to the earth again," she retorted. "Let go my hand, please!—and the ground is rather hard, and sometimes muddy, too!"

"What if we can't dwell always on the heights? There are the pleasant valleys, and 'love is of the valley'——"

"I know nothing of love." She spoke with a sudden fierceness that startled him. "And care less! All that matters is progress, success, the winning of the goal! I 've put my hand to the plough, and I 've no wish to look back—only give

me time, O God!" Her eyes were terrified, piteous.

"You 're unnerved—don't look like that!" His voice shook. "We will talk of other matters. Oh, Elf, don't take things so hard."

"That comes well from you," she retorted, "you who are breaking your heart for freedom. That is your master, and I have chosen mine. One cannot serve two."

"Cruel, merciless masters both of them. Let 's at least take love with us on the long highway."

"I shall have enough to carry, thank you."

"You are like a blind child renouncing the beauty of the world it has never seen——"

"Oh, well. . . ." Her tones grew light and careless. "Of course I don't renounce love in the usual common or garden sense. Why should I? It does not matter enough to interfere. It 's an incident in the background. After my picture is done, I may even marry and try not to make it a mere episode, but of course. . . ."

"Elf! I hate you when you talk like this!"

"It may be safer, wiser," she ended thoughtfully, "to marry some utterly ordinary, rather comfortably dull person, who will not want to interfere, or take up too much room in the foreground. I only meant that in the big, disturbing sense, I should forswear love. Now, there 's a girl I know who has the most enviable temperament in the world. She 's always pleasantly and romantically in love, if you know what I mean?

It 's like the froth on a glass of stout, to descend to banalities, looks a lot, but can be flicked off to leave the real draught of life undisturbed, unlessened. Sometimes the 'peg' on which she hangs her affections *pro tem*, is a would-be lover, sometimes a mere friend, oftener a celebrity, soldier, statesman, author—which, it never matters. She revels in an 'uncomfortable attachment' more than in any other, and I have no doubt that she will make a satisfactory wife eventually, and that her husband will be quite content. Yet I believe I shan't marry after all, lest it might interfere."

"You will at least marry no one but me," he said tensely.

"Oh, Mick, you always speak as if you were not married!"

"It 's not the thing irrevocable."

"I have always considered it so; and you are not remembering our compact very well."

"And Miss Dalton thinks you—lacking in the highest moral sense!" he cried mockingly. "She little knows! You may become such another in time!"

She turned away from his passionate eyes, biting her lips. She did not want to quarrel.

"One of those who *prefer* the stony path of righteousness," he said, with a sneer, "walk therein from choice, make no excursions of curiosity, of dalliance, or rest for a little while—and oh, how *proud* they are of their pathway!"

Then he saw her face, and swift repentance seized him. "I am an utter beast, a brute!" he cried, "and no one can despise me more than I despise myself: behind there 's ever the goad of misery that drives me on to madness and Heaven knows what. I don't—or seem to, care! Oh, Elf, for the free vagrant years again, and you, and you!"

"Here 's Dr. Byrne," cried Miss Elphenstonne, jumping up in a hurry to welcome her visitor. "I 've got heaps and heaps of cakes and I 've been obeying orders, really I have. But you are a suspicious man—you would n't have been in the least surprised to have caught me climbing trees."

He smiled, but he did not contradict her.

"Then you 'd have to throw medicine up to me," she laughed, "and if I missed, it would be *entirely* your fault for not curing me!"

"That 's quite the idea," he said. "It 's all my bad throwing, never their bad missing, that my patients blame me for."

CHAPTER XVII

HOW "FAT-LEGS" FOUND HIMSELF IN CLOVER

A SMALL chubby child was lying screaming lustily in a clover-field. That morning—the spirit of unrest seizing upon him—he had set out in quest of the Great Adventure. He had—he would have told you—walked through many wild forests, encountered many and strange beasts, and finally wandered with aching legs into the clover-field, because it looked like one close to his home. He expected to find awaiting his lordly pleasure, his cottage, his dinner, and his mother. They would be just over the rise yonder, he felt sure.

But behold none of these things met his view, and a very angry and aggrieved son of Adam lay down and cursed, in infantile fashion, the fate that had wronged him so cruelly!

And it was thus that Miss Elphenstonne, now, according to herself, as strong and well as ever, found him.

"Where is your mother, baby?" she enquired, looking round.

The child howled the louder. Perhaps thinking

of his missing mother—perhaps of his missing dinner. One can surmise as one pleases, only remember he was a boy-child and the ache was not entirely confined to his legs!

"Has a bee stung you, I wonder?" The girl dropped on her knees by the child and strove to gather him into her rather inadequate arms.

He kicked wildly, indignantly: showed fierce eyes of affront.

"Oh, what a *darling* baby!" cried the foolish stranger. "What dimples! What 's the matter, my precious? Who has dared to leave you all alone? The callous wretch!"

"'Ome!" yelled the wanderer, "'Ome! dinny! mummy!"

"Oh, now I understand, Ulysses," exclaimed the artist. "You are lost, and you put your dinner first! There, come along, Fat-Legs, and I 'll take you home. You dimpled darling of a duck!" Flushing and panting with the effort, she raised the heavy child in her arms and made a staggering step forward. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak!

"Which way did you come?" she gasped out.

The child checked his tears to point promptly to the North.

"Oh, dear," said poor Miss Elphenstonne, who found her burden literally more than she could bear. "All that way!" For the nearest cottage was two miles off. Could such a baby have walked all that distance alone? "Suppose I put you down

for a moment and you show me the way, brave Ulysses?" she coaxed.

But the youthful wanderer screamed at the idea, screamed hideously, clinging suffocatingly round her neck. "'Egs sore!" he wept. "Tummy sore—dinny!" Also, he had been christened "Tom," and did not like being called "names" by the stranger.

"He knows his own mind, at any rate," thought the girl, "and his disease, and only possible cure."

"Show lady which is home?" she coaxed again.

The small chubby hand pointed firmly to the west.

There were no cottages at all that way for miles. Eastwards there was, however, a tiny cottage a mile away. That must surely be his home!

"Fat-Legs show lady," she said again.

"Fat-legs" was very angry at the stupidity of the woman, but he showed her readily enough—due south!

"I give it up," thought the girl. "I shall go to the near cottage and see at any rate. They may know where he belongs and I can arrange for his transit. I had no idea babies were so heavy—perhaps it 's just as well it is n't twins, after all!" She laughed softly to herself with her flushed face against the child's fat body.

"Dinny! Mummy!" shrieked the child suddenly, in a piercing voice, and Miss Elphenstonne,

giving a little jump, stopped laughing. The victim at least saw no humour in the situation.

As a matter of fact, she had no breath left to laugh with. Her whole body ached, and her knees gave way, as she stumbled bravely forward. The boy was infinitely too heavy for any one so ridiculously small as herself. The task she had undertaken was, to say the least of it, Herculean; a less valiant spirit would have called it impossible. For Miss Elphenstonne the dictionary held no such word. Everything was possible if one tried hard enough. She was ready to admit, however, "it might be a bit of a job." So she staggered along, her face white and drawn, her breath uneven, her arms aching almost beyond endurance. Tears of sheer physical distress rose to her eyes. To make matters worse, the burden had now fallen asleep, and hung, a dead weight, in her arms. Her throat grew dry, she felt sick and faint, and drops of perspiration ran down into her eyes, blinding her.

"Oh, it *is* a good thing it is n't twins!" she thought again, a little hysterically.

Just then a welcome tread sounded and Mick strode towards her. "Oh, *here* you are—" he was beginning, when he stopped to stare at her protégé, his face a thundercloud. He noted everything in that instant's survey—the weight of the sleeping child, the anguish of the half-fainting bearer of the burden.

A violent exclamation burst from him as he

snatched the child roughly from her. "Do you want to *kill* yourself? What are you doing with the little beast, anyway? You idiot—you little idiot!"

"Oh, Mick, don't be cross," she panted, exhausted, "and it 's Baby Ulysses—"

His face did not relax.

"What were you doing with him? Good heavens, one can't trust you out of sight!"

"It 's Fat-Legs, and he was lost, poor little mite——"

"It was n't he who looked the poor little mite!" he retorted grimly. "You could have sent someone for him."

"Well, it 's such a duck," she said apologetically, "and its legs are so fat," she kissed a grubby dimpled knee as she spoke. "And he 'd have been frightened alone, and anyway, Mick," her eyes twinkled wickedly, "he is n't triplets, or even twins, you know!"

Mick, however, refused to smile. "How far have you been carrying him?"

"Only from the clover-field."

"*Only* from the clover-field! Good——"

"He was so frightened," she broke in quickly, "he wanted his dinner and his home. It was like being lost in the desert to him. Poor, valiant, little vagabond, the outside world has disillusioned him early! Look at his surprised, blue eyes."

"I hate blue eyes," said Mick savagely. Muriel's eyes were a shallow blue, and young

Gore's eyes had been brightest, clearest blue; it was a colour that spelt nothing good for Michael Talbot.

"Well . . . he 's 'only a little one!'" replied the girl, making a face at her stern mentor.

"You looked like a silly little three-year-old staggering under the weight of the 'latest' baby!" he exclaimed, exasperated.

Miss Elphenstonne's eyes were very beautiful in their pity: "Poor mites—poor, wee, tiny mites!"

"Oh, I daresay . . ." he spoke gruffly, "but there 's no reason to make a wee, tiny mite of yourself. And I won't have it! You look half-dead—I 've a good mind to carry you too!" He made a quick step forward.

She was quicker. "Certainly not!" she said hurriedly. "Do be careful of Fat-Legs, Mick, he 's slipping." She came and moved the child to a more comfortable position. "You 're not very clever at carrying babies," she said critically.

"Am I likely to be?" he returned harshly. "What man is—unless he possesses one of his own, and I—" He stopped abruptly, for a sudden thought dominated him, and he grasped the child so tightly that it cried out in terror. "*If he was the Elf's—and mine!*" And the thought was written in his eyes as he looked straight at the woman over the head of the lost baby.

Their gaze held together for a long moment, then Miss Elphenstonne turned quickly, a sudden look of horror in her eyes.

"I 'm sure he must have come from the near cottage," she said, speaking breathlessly, "he pointed every way *but* east, and there 's a woman there with yellow hair like his."

Mick was quite incapable of reply, and made no attempt at it.

"I hope she 's kept his dinner for him, poor wanderer," went on the girl lightly. "It was that which troubled him most. Such a baby son of Adam! And listening to every word, and very angry at being called names. Yes, meals are important things, Ulysses."

The child scowled at her. She had not carried him comfortably, he had not felt at all secure in those thin, weak arms; this big brown man was much more to his taste. And probably she had helped to lose him. Women were such silly things!

"I 've known things more so," said Mick shortly.

Miss Elphenstonne laughed—most creditably. "Oh, have you? But when one has lost one 's way and is an hour late and not sure of any meal *at all?* It 's rather important then, is n't it? You 're better off than I, for, if you *have* a big appetite, it does you credit; I 'm a 'bad-doer', as Harrison says of the Lady Ever-Leaner. By-the-bye, have you forgotten you are to finish the last chapter of the book to-morrow, because then my picture can be finished too?"

"The way you 've slaved to rush off that picture

is ridiculous!" said Mick angrily. "You 've worked like one possessed. What 's the hurry? There 's plenty of time."

"Is there? I never feel like that, and I *had* to finish it. What a pair of famous people we shall be when both our efforts are given to the world!"

"I don't give the *Book of the Elf* to the world," returned Mick. "I give it to you, and you know it! They can damn it as they please, it is nothing —less than nothing! I have got the only verdict that counts!"

"*Rubbidge!* How are you going to *wear* your laurel crown? What is the latest *chic*-est fashion?"

"It won't concern *me*," said Mick indifferently. "It 's the last thing that will come my way. I don't want it enough. There are two things I want so very much more! But yours will become you however you wear it—and your hair is like a crown already!"

"A horrid silver one," she retorted, making a face, "and silver is so cheap! Oh, Mick, I do want my laurel crown, want it dreadfully and beyond everything in the world!"

"Then of course you 'll get it," he returned in a tone of hopeless finality. "I wish it had n't stolen your humanity, my dear."

"Ah, there 's the cottage!" exclaimed Miss Elphenstonne, in a tone of relief, for they were on dangerous ground, "and that must be the mother. She has the same yellow hair and is looking distracted. Look! she sees us!"

"Yes," agreed Mick. "The child 's asleep again."

"Wake up, Fat-Legs," whispered Miss Elphenstonne, "here 's a shilling for having dimples!" She pushed the money into the small, hot hand.

"And half a crown for being a nuisance," added Michael Talbot.

"There 's nobody to give us anything for being fools and nuisances," observed Miss Elphenstonne plaintively. "What an unjust world it is, to be sure! Has he got the money all right?"

The child stared at his benefactors with amazed eyes, but his fat hands grasped the money with undoubted tenacity. He was not so young that an elder brother had not taken him to the little shop and post-office, and got sweets in exchange for something that clinked like this, though its colour was different. The man had carried him comfortably and given him a big, fat coin. The woman had crumpled him up and nearly dropped him and only given him a little one. Also she had helped to lose him, and refused to understand aright his directions as to the homeward track. Therefore, he stared resentfully at the woman with hard, blue eyes; but Mick got a brief, shy smile.

"Will the parents take it for themselves?" wondered Miss Elphenstonne. "I believe he understands. Look how those fat hands are holding on for all they are worth!"

"He won't let them—the young beggar!"

chuckled Mick. "He 's going to be a financier or a money-lender; I can see it in his eye!"

"Oh, Mick, with such adorable, fat legs and dimples! You shall not slander the duck! He 's going to be a stage yokel, never dirty but always picturesque, and wear a smock and have corn-coloured hair and court a milkmaid in a sun-bonnet!"

"A milkmaid in a confection from the Edgware Road, and cheap, high-heeled shoes!" corrected the ruthless Mick.

"Oh, you novelists never have any pretty fancies outside your books!" cried the artist, in a pretended rage. "You are all realists, materialists, the most brutal of pessimists! And he *is* going to be a yokel and court a maid in a sun-bonnet!"

"Unless his mother sends him to the city in a top-hat—well, here she is. Good-bye, Master Ulysses!"

"A kiss, little vagabond, for being such a naughty Fat-Legs!" Miss Elphenstonne sighed a little as she kissed the red mouth.

The child indignantly wiped away the kiss. Why could n't the woman leave him alone? Had n't she made trouble enough for him already? But when the big man, staring hard at the girl, kissed him too on the same spot with, "And here 's another—to keep it company," he did not wipe that away. His fellow-man had treated him as one gentleman should treat another.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VAGABOND

Give to me the life I love,
  Let the lane go by me;
Give the jolly heaven above
  And the byway nigh me. . . .

Let the blow fall soon or late,
  Let what will be o'er me;
Give the face of earth around,
  And the road before me.

R. L. STEVENSON.

FOR a little while they walked homewards in silence, then Mick spoke quickly, sharply. "Elf . . . " he began, and turned on her wild, grey eyes, dark with passion.

She caught his arm quickly, and looked up fearlessly into his face. "Don't drive me out of the forest yet, Mick," she implored, "for that is what it will mean if you say too much. There is a certain line . . . I cannot forgive you if you cross it, for everything will be spoilt. I am sorry, horribly sorry, but it will pass . . . drive it away, Mick; it 's an occupant with no right to house-room."

"It drives me, not I it," he answered sullenly, "and I cannot feel 'this too will pass.' It will go with life, I suppose, not before."

"It will go if you seek to make it go, dear," she answered, very gently. "Don't leave me without my comrade, my friend. I want him so!" He walked by her side struggling with himself, and with restraint new to him. He dared say no more, just then at any rate, for he knew she would fly from the forest if he did. He saw it in her eyes. She was growing a little afraid of him, and he did not know whether it was a good sign or not. Did love walk hand in hand with fear?

"What *shall* we talk of then?" he asked heavily.

"Uncle William," she answered instantly, "he 's coming to say good-bye to-morrow, and oh, what a ceremony he will make of it, how impressive he will be—and how you and I will laugh afterwards! But do you know, I can't help liking him in spite of his pomposity and absurdity."

"You 'd be ungrateful if you did n't—since you are his latest secret sorrow. Do you know, I believe his wife understands him perfectly."

"Then she need never be really dull," returned Miss Elphenstonne. "Imagine a husband or wife as a humorous entertainment! Oh, here we are at the woods! Mick is n't it *gorgeous* this afternoon. Look at the colour, the line, the *silence!*"

"I suppose so," he answered, with an effort, and looked down at her as the one picture that mattered.

The autumn leaf harvest lay brown and crimson and gold upon the ground, and Miss Elphenstonne seemed to be wading through a river deepening into sullen red; there was sunset over her head behind the hill, and sunset flaming at her feet. She stood, the centre of light and of his world. Then the other worlds came surging up towards him, took him by the hand, and he moved, a man between two obsessions. One would not content him, he must have both; the new love seemed the dearer, but she cared only to push him into the arms of the oldest love of them all. The familiar lines of the East India Dock Road rose before him; the road that leads to wandering; the highway to many and wide seas; the pathway of sailor-men and vagabonds such as he. The road they knew best; the road they loved best; the way that led to life—and to death. Five times he had passed down it, and there always seemed another time to come. Of course he had gone by other roads, travelled on the great liners, rubbed shoulders in floating palaces with the great and the small. When in funds, this last road was swifter to an end. His companions he had understood with a cruel, uncanny intention: of them he had been understood not at all, but he had been loved, and he had been sought by both men and women; he had been almost worshipped, for, though he carried no harp, yet he was an Ulysses whose golden lure lay in his strange roving heart binding to him the hearts of men. Not many had chosen to pass him by without a word of recog-

nition or greeting, though one had done so, and he had been glad of it. . . . Once he had been passing through a land where men with haunted, fever-stricken faces were hourly drained of life, to earn the means to live; where they rose at morn in their full strength and lay under the sod ere another dawn, adding yet one more to the toll of the White Man's Grave. While he sought an old, dear school and college friend, of whose fortunes he had heard last in this country, rumour had brought him much concerning the ways of a native chief whose name was a synonym for all that was bestial and cruel, and it was hinted that Mick's old friend, curious as to native customs, clever at their language, and at disguise, might have met an unspeakable fate at the hands of this human beast. But Mick, an optimist, refused to believe this possibility, and, bit by bit, traced his friend along the coast and to the very foot of a native village. And then as he waited for parley with the awful chief, the big-gun expedition, white soldiers, a band of trusty natives round him, the native leader, acknowledging the flag of truce, had walked slowly up to him to tell—what he chose to tell—of the fate of the vanished Englishman, and as he came, Mick heard tales that turned him sick. Brute, devil, native, this creature advancing was yet a man, and formed in the image of a godhead. Then he came near, and for a minute Mick stood face to face with him—and saw looking out of a face, cruel with a cruelty below man's, bestial with a bestiality below a brute's,

the blue eyes of his friend. Something human—since shame is human—had flashed for a moment into that debased face; then Mick, in his smart white tropical suit, and the dark man clad as a native, parted without a word or further look . . . and the hottest, most stinging shame, had remained with Mick. He told the others that his friend was dead—and better dead: and the name of the man never passed his lips again. It was good to wander about the world, to know a thousand strange experiences, odd coincidences; but it was not good to look upon such things as these. . . .

Miss Elphenstonne, horrified by a look which crept over his face, touched him on the arm. "What is it?" she cried.

He recovered himself with an effort, shuddering slightly. "It is something I cannot bear to think about, much less mention," he answered. "A ghost out of the past, that is all."

She said no more, but the fact that even while he walked by her side, even while he would have her listen to vows of passionate love, he could forget her, wander off a thousand miles in spirit, did not altogether please her. She should have been glad that the old love she bade him cleave to was the strongest after all. Yet, was she quite glad?

"Your face was horrible," she said. "It frightened me! Here we are home at last—and here is Esmerelda coming down the hill to meet us."

After that, Mick saw little or nothing of Miss

Elphenstonne for several days; she withdrew herself completely, making work her excuse.

"But I never hindered you before!" he objected.

"You hinder me now," she answered, looking into his stormy eyes. "Just for a few days—till I can have my old, sensible, cured Mick again!"

"And Byrne—is he to leave you alone too?" he flashed jealously, for the doctor called at the tent more often than Mick thought at all necessary—even in the guise of friendship and art-lover.

She flung back her head. "That is, of course, entirely as he and I choose," she answered, a little recklessly.

"If that man interferes too much, I shall wring his neck," Mick said calmly.

Miss Elphenstonne's eyes blazed, and she turned on her heel. "I see we are never going to be friends again," she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes we are," he said certainly, ere walking off, "and more than friends, Elf—more than friends!"

His tone was so savagely sure that a sudden sense of fear fell upon her, and she looked after the big frame in dismay. "Perhaps I had better just pack up and fly," she said to herself. But she did nothing of the sort.

Mick tramped the forest for hours, and then, raging against the shackles that bound him, flung himself in at the cottage door.

Muriel looked up startled at his rough entrance. "What is it?" she exclaimed. "And how late

you are! Have you had supper? There 's a cold chicken."

"Thanks." He tackled it in silence.

"I thought you were going to stay out all night," she said plaintively, "and then goodness knows what Mrs. Hobbs and Aunt Susan would have said! Really you 're the most extraordinary and erratic person that ever was born, and I think the forest makes you worse! I daresay you will be better when we get into a civilised neighbourhood and have a nice smart house and social claims. Good-night, and oh—while I remember, Aunt Susan wants you *specially* to look at the brakes of her bicycle, they 've got jammed or something and they won't act and she may want to use it any day! You put yours right, so perhaps you 'll do hers?"

"Of course!" he answered absently.

"You won't forget? You 'll be sure not to forget?"

"Oh, of course I won't forget!" he answered, scarcely conscious of what she was saying.

So Dr. Byrne might go in and out as he pleased, might he? *He* had n't got warned off the premises! He 'd better take care!

CHAPTER XIX

A CEREMONIOUS LEAVE-TAKING

MR. HIGGINS, full of smiles and loving kindness, was driving up from Stony Cross. He was going to see his niece, upon whom he had conferred such benefits, also "poor Susan," who could not conceal her admiration for him and envy of his wife, Mick, to whom he had taken the strongest fancy as one man of intellect to another, and—Miss Elphenstonne. Though he had succumbed to the fascinations of the artist, he never forgot she was niece of Lord Elphenstonne and intimate of the Comtesse de Malmédy. He felt that he was practically moving in the great world when he talked to the Bohemian who took no account whatsoever of social glories. Born to greatness, doomed to greatness, as he knew himself to be, under the admiring appreciative grateful eyes of those he had benefited, the very acme of greatness was reached. He saw it not only as reflected in his own eyes in the glass, but in the eyes of others. Even Mrs. Hobbs knew him for what he was, and Mick had discovered that under his vein of natural dignity and *hauteur*, there ran a true fund of wit and

humour, and that, but for his superiority to temptation, he would have been a very bad, bold man indeed.

"My *dear* young people!" and he had grasped them emotionally by the hand. "So the fatted calf has been killed for the prodigal uncle—ha! ha! —and the estimable Mrs. Hobbs is to cook a farewell lunch! And our clever young artist friend is to honour us with her company!"

"How do you do, William?" said Miss Dalton, a little jealously coming forward.

"And how are *you?*" he purred, in rather a pitying fashion, over the stumpy hand of Miss Dalton. "Dear me, as young as ever! We shall hear of you being married to some charming young man one of these days. Ha! ha!" He did not, however, really expect it.

"I do not care for young men," said Miss Dalton, not ill-pleased. "They are too wild and reckless for my taste, too crude." She looked at Mick. She had been very much annoyed in the days of her —comparative—youth, when her young *fiancé* had snatched the cup of matrimony from her lips by getting drowned a few days before the wedding. She never quite forgave him in her heart. He might just as well have met his fate a few days after the wedding, when she would have had a right to "Mrs." for the rest of her life, perhaps even have married again. Widows seemed to find it easier to be married than rather elderly spinsters. The romance of her whole life had been wasted on the great Mr. Hig-

gins. She admired his presence and she worshipped his success. She had thought of him by day and dreamed of him by night, and had magnified his vacillating attentions—and had gone in her best clothes and with her best brave smile to see him married to another. Dr. Byrne had—at one time—seemed "a chance," but about him no romantic fancies gathered, and now even he had gone over to the camp of the enemy, and was more friendly with the erratic artist than was at all judicious. One by one her hopes had failed, one by one the dreams of life had fled from her, but nothing could destroy her somewhat bitter admiration for the man who had once come near to marrying her.

Jane seemed to care little or nothing for the great position she had won. Miss Dalton would have exalted in it, been intolerable to those whom she considered her inferiors. Mrs. Higgins had no adoring admiration for her husband. Miss Dalton would have worshipped him, have been his slave; have held it her highest privilege to wait on him hand and foot, and listen reverently to every golden word of wisdom that dropped from his lips. She would have revelled in the daily drive in the smart carriage-and-pair, especially past the houses of acquaintances who could never hope even for a donkey cart. Jane hated it, and sat bolt upright with an uneasy air. She preferred to put on great, thick boots and a tweed skirt and go for a tramp with her mangy beast of a dog—a creature that was not in the least like a lady's dog, but

which the stupid wife had picked up starving in the streets—as if that were any excuse! Miss Dalton was a religious and orthodox woman, but at times a peevish feeling that the ways of Providence were unaccountably strange would obtrude itself upon her. The great Mr. Higgins was utterly wasted on the provincial Jane—but God had given him to Jane and not to her! As a good churchwoman she bowed her head to the cross, but the old and unsubdued Adam wanted sadly to rebel!

"You all look so fresh and well," sighed Mr. Higgins. "You make me feel jaded with the cares of office! Even Esmerelda is in the pink of condition—ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha!" echoed everybody obediently, while Esmerelda smirked at the gracious notice.

"Be good, Esmerelda!" said the rich uncle, patting the beast.

"And if you can't be good, be careful!" added Mick, with a meaning wink at his gay and delighted relative.

"Tut! tut!" said Mr. Higgins, preening himself.

He strolled out after the nephew-in-law and took him affectionately by the arm. "Well, my boy, how 's matrimony?" he enquired jocularly.

"You should know best—you 've been married longer," retorted Mick.

"Ha! ha! What a fellow you are to be sure! But I am not on my honeymoon with the wife of my heart! We don't all have your luck, my dear chap."

"So it seems," agreed Mick pleasantly. "Think I can't see your little game, you old reprobate! The poor, unsophisticated, little thing—you 'll break her heart!"

"Not at all!" said Mr. Higgins, suppressing a beam of unholy joy; "and I should not call her actually unsophisticated——"

"But compared with you——"

"Ah well, of course . . . but a married man, my dear Mick, one holding, if I may say so, great responsibilities. . . ."

"Then you will not ask her to fly with you?" enquired Mick, with a little sigh. "Poor girl, it 'll be a sad blow to her! When one 's an artist *and* from Paris *and* related to a peer, one expects that sort of thing—ask Mrs. Hobbs. *She* knows."

"My dear fellow, you 're joking, of course!"

"I only hope it 'll prove a joke to her," said Mick, shaking his head. "Fun to you, death to me, sort of business, you know."

"If I thought I 'd blighted that poor girl's life, I 'd want to shoot myself!" exclaimed Mr. Higgins passionately, really distressed. "Why I admire her, respect her, more than I can say. She 's—she 's been a revelation to me! But I thought it wiser to go, to see no more of her——"

"Your high sense of honour does you credit—but if she *expects* to be flown with?"

Mr. Higgins wiped a heated face. "I am a married man. I have a great position in the eyes of the world," he stammered, "and—I take the

collections," he added, with confused inconsequence.

Mick dug him daringly in the ribs—or as near to them as he could get—"I see, the get-rich-quick idea!"

"Oh, shocking, shocking!" said the great William, with an undignified giggle. "You knew what I meant . . . they depend upon me at the church. I am the rector's right hand man; it 's not only the collections. . . ."

"The poor-boxes too?" suggested the irrepressible Mick.

As a matter of fact Mr. Higgins was very much the pillar of his church, and greatly respected. He collected with such awful majesty, that no one —however skilful the clink—dare essay buttons, and the poor felt deadly ashamed of their humble halfpennies under the godlike eye of Mr. Higgins. The very poor, lacking the moral courage to defy Mr. Higgins and pass the plate, preferred to leave the church, which was on the whole a good thing, since it left more room for the wealthier members. As a sidesman Mr. Higgins's tact was equal to any emergency, and the wealthy were never crowded.

Then they returned to a very excellent luncheon, and to find Miss Elphenstonne looking very demure and very picturesque, awaiting them. She scarcely looked at Mick, but Mr. Higgins she greeted with what poor Miss Dalton considered bold effusiveness, and actually chaffed him on his prolonged bachelor holiday.

"How she has the *nerve!*" wondered the unhappy lady, and liked her none the more for it.

Mr. Higgins, wondering if after all it could be possible he had made a conquest of this gay creature, met her with ill-suppressed emotion, which he believed she would understand. And Miss Elphenstonne, giving Mick a look of camaraderie, understood perfectly, and wore very large and fascinating twinkles in her eyes.

"It 's sad to think the best of friends must part," sighed Mr. Higgins heavily, as he passed his plate for a second helping of Mrs. Hobbs's most excellent game pie. He was a little shocked to note what a hearty appetite the small, lorn maiden possessed. Perhaps she had n't taken the smart very seriously after all. He hoped not—he was quite sure he hoped not. It would be awful to blight a young girl's life, and Miss Elphenstonne was not even a young girl, but a brilliant, well-connected woman of the world. That was the type that never got over it, never married anybody else. Mr. Higgins blew his nose loudly, and Esmerelda looked up with a jerk.

"He thinks it 's the trumpet-call to the feast," said Mick, after a sly wink at Miss Elphenstonne.

"My dear Mick!" Mr. Higgins's voice was full of grave reproof. "You go a little too far, my dear fellow, a little too far, you do indeed."

"Don't make fun of things like that—" whispered Muriel angrily.

"Sacred things," whispered back Mick, looking

at the suffused nose of Mr. Higgins, and saying aloud to that gentleman, "I meant it all quite metaphorically, and I was sure *you* would understand."

"Of course," said Mr. Higgins uneasily, "of course I understand!" Had he missed the clue of one man of intellect to another? Was it perhaps a quotation? Or something very clever, very subtle? He knew he understood Mick Talbot, as well as that young man understood—with due reverence—himself.

"And so you 're quite making your fortune," he went on quickly. "I shall have a famous author for a nephew. Ha! ha!"

"I can but hope to hold a night-light to your acetylene lamp," said Mick very humbly, "but as long as you refrain from blowing me out . . . ."

"Ha! ha!" cried Mr. Higgins appreciatively. "You need n't be afraid of that. I will have you to meet my friends—I will indeed! I feel sure they will be charmed . . . charmed. . . . Jane shall give a big reception and you shall be the chief *pièce de-de*—you know what I mean, and I will introduce you personally to the Bishop, and Sir Walter Badbury, charming people I assure you."

Muriel's face lit up with delighted surprise. Oh, how clever of Mick to get round Uncle William! She flung her husband a grateful look. Why their fortunes, financially and socially, were made! The Bishop! Sir Walter Badbury!

Mick bowed his head. "The honour is too

great for me," he said, in a broken voice. "I am unworthy, overcome——"

"Not at all, my dear fellow, not at all, though the right spirit! And perhaps our young friend," turning with much *empressement* to Miss Elphenstonne, "will honour us too? The Bishop and Sir Walter will be delighted I feel sure. Possibly you know his lordship's aunt, Lady Georgina?"

But Miss Elphenstonne had never heard of the Bishop's aunt and said so. Mr. Higgins, his eyes exuding love, and the third helping of a rich pudding, felt his heart swell within him. How fond he was of them all! He might even, had there been an emporium handy where one got plenty of choice and one's money's worth, have done, what he had never done before even on a holiday, when he was the most genial of beings, and spent recklessly upon them all, bought them presents to remember him especially by. And he would have given Mick a box of the best cigars too; there would even have been a half-crown photo frame for "poor Susan," and he would have sent her a signed photograph to put in it: she had so few pleasures. Muriel should have had something for three or four shillings, and Miss Elphenstonne something very nice indeed, possibly costing fifteen or sixteen shillings. One did not give half-crown photo frames to nieces of peers and intimates of countesses of note. Even Mrs. Hobbs should have something. But of course there was no place where one could be rash and foolish.

Mrs. Hobbs, catching his eye, had already decided that as far as she was concerned, Mr. Higgins was going to prove himself very rash and foolish indeed, and bestow upon her a memento worthy of his greatness and her expectations.

"Alas! all good things must come to an end," said Mr. Higgins, rising very heavily from the table, as the sound of wheels approached. "I must say *au revoir* though not good-bye. Ha! ha!"

As the one of least consequence, he bestowed his first benediction on Miss Dalton, who was so upset by it that she spent the rest of the afternoon prostrate in her own chamber, thinking with vain tears of the might-have-been.

Muriel he kissed fondly. "I feel I shall never have cause to regret what I have done for you, Muriel," he said solemnly. "You 've been worthy of it, you and that clever husband of yours. I said from the first he would make his way, and that you were a very, very lucky girl. Never forget the great responsibilities of matrimony; never forget, my dear, dear child," his voice became husky "to thank God kneeling for a good man's love."

"Oh, yes!" gasped Muriel, "I do!" What a mercy he never suspected the truth, the real character of Mick. Certainly her husband was clever, for he could hoodwink even the great Mr. Higgins. "I always do," she said, not quite truthfully, "and for you too, Uncle William."

"Tut! tut!" said Mr. Higgins, very much affected. "Tut! tut! my dear. If we are n't put

into the world to do good, specially to our relations, what *are* we here for? If Fate and God have seen fit to call us to the high places, must n't we seek to raise up those in the low? Not that I mean for a moment your husband is in such a position. He will get to the top, I said it from the first—and Miss Elphenstonne agrees with me."

"Of course she is very clever," said Muriel grudgingly.

"She is a very great young lady indeed," said Mr. Higgins gravely. "I have the highest opinion of her mental and social abilities. As the wife of a man placed above his fellows she should be an asset—the very greatest asset."

"Oh, Uncle William, what *do* you mean?" cried Muriel alarmed. "She 's not likely to marry now. She 's quite old, and her hair is grey. . . ."

"She is quite likely to marry—and anybody she pleases," said Mr. Higgins, displeased, "and it is my earnest hope she will do so and forget . . . an idle dream."

"Oh, Uncle *William!*" almost wailed Muriel. Had the artist dreamed her idle dream about Uncle William? A married man! The property of his nephews and nieces. A great being far out of her reach! And had he . . . encouraged her?

"My dear, that is enough, we will say no more." His voice trailed mournfully. "It is not given to all of us to marry in our youth the love of our heart. Greatness does not always mean happiness. Many a secret sorrow gnaws its way . . . 'uneasy

lies the head that wears a crown' . . . ." He was too overcome for more. True, he might not wear a crown, but one could substitute the word coronet. The peerage was ever looming nearer the horizon. He was worth five hundred thousand pounds.

Muriel, flying perturbed to her own room, met Mick on the stairs. "Well, has he done enjoying himself?" he enquired.

"*Enjoying* himself! He was saying good-bye to me, to us all—he 's with Miss Elphenstonne now—and he 's awfully upset!"

"That 's what I meant."

"Oh, what *are* you talking about! Mick, promise that on the way to the station you will keep it up, not let him see you as you are, suspect . . . he thinks quite a lot of you. It 's odd." The last words escaped her against her will.

"Rather!" agreed Mick, with a grin. "Devilish odd! Dare I go down or shall I find him weeping on the Elf's shoulder? I do hope he 'll remember his hundred stone or so, and that she 's barely six, poor little mite. Shall I have to sweep up her mangled remains?"

"He spoke of her in the most peculiar manner I did not like it at all. It was not quite . . . nice. One would think——"

"He 'd fallen in love with her, and that only his great sense of right forbade him to 'Let 's fly together, love, never mind the weather, love.' Just so. He 's heartbroken. And then he 's

blighted her, spoiled her life! It 's an awful thought for a man like Uncle William!"

Muriel gazed at him with horror. "You cannot mean that—it would be too awful—that he was faithless to Jane in his heart, I mean. Poor Jane, who must think so much of him, worship him so!"

"Perhaps it 's just the exuberance of his bachelor holiday," said Mick. "Perhaps he always does it. Perhaps his track is strewn with the bodies of the slain. *Ho yus!*"

"How can you be so flippant! And you pretend to be her friend. Perhaps she did n't know he was married. Perhaps she cherished hopes. It would have been a great match for her."

"What you women have to put up with!" returned Mick, wiping away imaginary tears. "How you do get left, to be sure! How often are you blighted!"

"You have no feeling at all! I did think you would have minded about her. You 're not only heartless to me and about poor Aunt Susan, but to your greatest friend!"

Descending, Mick found Miss Elphenstonne, twinkling outrageously—and quite fascinating Mr. Higgins afresh by the brightness of her great eyes—in the throes of a heart-rending farewell to the might-have-been. She was struggling to withdraw her hands before Mr. Higgins should have fulfilled his fell intention of bestowing a kiss upon one of them. Mr. Higgins

was moved to the depths of his being; there were tears in his eyes, and Miss Elphenstonne's wet lashes filled him with a hundred strange emotions. He did not know that hers were tears of laughter. Mick saw the clumsy salute; unfortunately the horrified, incredulous Muriel saw it too. "She ought to be ashamed of herself!" she cried chokingly, and decided that Miss Dalton must never know. The artist was dangerous after all, in spite of her ugliness, and it was just as well Mr. Higgins was leaving.

Mr. Higgins humm'd and ha'd and tried—not very successfully—to look innocent when his niece appeared. Had she seen? Did she suspect anything? What a Lothario she would think him! Dear! dear! To do the right, to choose the better part, and still to be condemned,—misunderstood!

"Oh, there you are Uncle William!" said Muriel, as if surprised, and Mr. Higgins decided that she had seen nothing. Mick, of course, would understand, he was a man of the world, a man of heart.

"Yes, here I am—ha! ha!" said Mr. Higgins, "and here you are, my dear, ha! ha! Come to see the last of the poor old uncle! Well, I must not keep the trap waiting any longer, or the rascal will want to charge for his time."

Mrs. Hobbs appeared at the back-kitchen door, and Mr. Higgins, perhaps to hide his confusion, decided to extend his benediction to her. As a cook she was divine, and a few kind, encouraging words would make the poor woman happy, give

her something to look back upon. The future peer would speak to her as one human to another.

"How pleased Aunt Jane will be to have you back again!" said Muriel softly, adding, with a smile to Miss Elphenstonne, "Aunt Jane is Uncle's wife, you know."

Mr. Higgins went red and dived into the back-kitchen. Was this a time to be reminded of Jane?

"Oh, yes," said Miss Elphenstonne, bearing up in what Muriel considered rather a brazen fashion, "how nice!"

"He has such a big heart—" began Muriel.

"And such a big—" interrupted Mick, in another whisper.

"*Mick!*"

"I was only going to say *head*," he assured her humbly; "or, at the worst, waistcoat. Miss Elphenstonne would not allow me to be rude about him."

"Hush—he will hear," returned Muriel. "I 'm going to wait outside." But the others did not take that hint and remained where they were, looking at each other with mirthful eyes.

"Consider relations as a recreation, and you overcome one of the adversities of life," whispered Mick. "I say, Elf, if we stay here we shall be low eavesdroppers, and see and hear everything—the door is not quite shut and—they can't see us. What do you say—as Eve?"

"Eve . . . Eve listened," said Miss Elphenstonne thoughtfully, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"You must n't call my rich uncle, the Serpent. Now mind you share the apple with Adam, and take all the blame if we get found out," and he squeezed himself up against her on the window seat.

"Well, Mrs. Hobbs," began Mr. Higgins pompously, "I 've come to say good-bye, ha! ha!"

"You 're very welcome, your grice!" said Mrs. Hobbs, dropping a deep curtsey, her best eye on the alert, the other rolling wildly. "I alwiys did siy as I knew a real gent when I seed 'im!" She wiped her right hand rather ostentatiously, on her apron.

Mr. Higgins eyed this manœuvre uneasily. He had believed Mrs. Hobbs to have a soul above that sort of thing—but had any of them? Were n't they all harpies, seeking to rend from a rich, hard-working man the fruit of his toils? Where would he have been now if he had been "weak"? Certainly not an owner of five hundred thousand pounds on the way to a peerage! But stay, perhaps he did her an injustice. She had craved the honour of a handshake, so as to have something to boast about among her fellows. He extended his hand, and Mrs. Hobbs held it thoughtfully, an absent look in her eye; then she let it drop, and began to polish her own hand on her apron.

"I must siy as it 's a treat to find an 'igh gent what don't tike after the lord what I lodged for three diys once to oblige a friend of 'is, looked all right though no presence, an' beggin' your parding

for makin' free, but I 'ave always admired looks an figger hin a gent. This 'ere lord—but of course there 's folk as is a disgrice in every profession——"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Higgins, hastily trying to pass Mrs. Hobbs, who was somehow between him and the door. "Just so."

"He came and 'ad the impudence to offer me five shilluns, an' I frowed it at 'im—none of your hinsults here, says I!"

"Dear, dear, not quite respectful, Mrs. Hobbs, I fear. But of course you were right in principle, the habit of tipping is obnoxious, most obnoxious and no superior soul expects it——"

"Just so, your grice! Tippin' *no!* Of course, an 'andsome present—that 's different, and a pleasure to real 'igh-placed gents, an' a pleasure to be accepted, but five shilluns! 'None of your hinsults here,' says I. 'I 'll pocket them,' says he grinnin' foolish, and puts the five shilluns in 'is own pocket—the swine!"

"Really, Mrs. Hobbs, you shock me. A peer of the realm——"

Mrs. Hobbs quite misunderstood. "I don't wonder! 'E shocked me too! Somethink cruel it was! But of course 'e were n't as 'igh hup as you, and never wored the breeches or a gold chain or nothink, your grice, so 'e 'ad 'is excuses maybe, but if I 'd knowed the sort 'e was when I mide 'im a gime-pie what no duke would turn up 'is nose at, as *you* knowin', 'avin' 'ad free 'elpin's and said it

did me credit, or when I blacked his b——d, big boots, I 'd——"

Mr. Higgins raised an admonishing hand. "Hush, Mrs. Hobbs, I command you. You must not speak of your betters in such a tone."

"Betters is as betters *does*, your grice," said Mrs. Hobbs humbly, "as well you knows. Well, good-bye your lordship, and it 's an honour to have served you, if only to a gime-pie." And she held out her polished hand.

Alas, that even the great have their weakness after all! Mr. Higgins left a sovereign within that skilful palm, and none seemed less surprised than Mrs. Hobbs. She seemed indeed quite unconscious of its existence.

When Mr. Higgins got outside, he found everybody assembled to see him off, and wished he had his carriage and pair to drive him away in real state. He would have preferred that Miss Elphenstonne, failing less celestial means of transit, should catch her last glimpses of him behind his expensive grays.

He got solemnly into the trap, shook hands all round once more, and smiled on poor Susan.

"Good-bye," he said, "take care of yourself, my dear girl."

"Good-bye," cried the valiant spinster. "Give my love to poor Jane—I hope she won't feel being torn away from Manchester too much." And without waiting for a reply, she fled to her room, and the refuge of tears.

All the way to the station, Mr. Higgins sat silent, bearing the look of one who was suffering terribly for the sake of right, and smiled while the fox ate his vitals.

Mick was very unkind and selfish, for he knew the great man wanted him to ask if anything was wrong, but he was suddenly very sick of his benefactor and all appertaining to him, and his sole wish was to see him borne out of the station. The bad little boy was on Totton platform though without the suet-pudding mother or lean father, and his face lit up as he saw Mick.

"Hullo!" he cried, sidling up to him while Mr. Higgins went into the ticket office. "The fat old buster that turned up trumps after all; but I 've spent that half-crown. It does seem a pity measles are keepin' me away from school, and I 'm not travelling up just yet. Shall I thank the old blighter for the half-crown?"

"No," said Mick, "just you take your hook! That 's the last sixpence of his you 'll ever see! Now git, my boy!" And the boy got!

"That little horror!" exclaimed Mr. Higgins, as, returning from the office, he had a vanishing glimpse of the evil child. "He 's not going up too, is he?" He was red with anger and alarm.

"Not for some time yet. I 'm afraid we 're rather early."

"It does n't matter," returned Mr. Higgins heavily. "Trifles are nothing. . . ." He subsided, sighing deeply, on to the seat.

Mick made no remark.

"It does me good to see *your* happiness, my dear fellow," said Mr. Higgins, in a moved voice.

"I am so glad."

"I was young myself once."

"And not so very long ago," Mick compelled himself to murmur.

"Ah. . . ." Mr. Higgins heaved a mighty sigh. "The heart knoweth its own bitterness. We will not talk about the present, the wound is too fresh, but if that were all . . . you are more fortunate than I. . . ."

Mick looked encouraging,—and at the clock. Muriel should have nothing to complain of.

"She died . . ." said Uncle William, in a whisper, and blew his nose loudly.

Mick blew his louder; several people looked round with a violent start.

". . . Before I could marry her," added Mr. Higgins, with awful pathos. "Fate may have meant me for greatness but it has dealt with me cruelly in affairs of the heart. I was never quite the same again: one is n't! And she—so near her happiness!" The ready moisture rose to his suffused eyes. A clever, sympathetic young man, Muriel 's husband! One could talk to him as to an equal.

But Mick, looking gravely at the afflicted, only thought of the meal the grief-stricken man had eaten.

"Her wedding dress . . . " the speaker's

voice broke, "was buried with her. It was my wish, though it had been the best satin. . . ."

Mick blew his nose so violently that the startled people jumped again.

Uncle William beamed upon him. "I must not depress your careless joy with my grief—a hidden sorrow, my dear boy, a hidden sorrow! That and one other, you may have guessed. . . . We endure; the world knows nothing of these things, perhaps even cares less."

"I should n't wonder," agreed Mick. He wondered how many of Mr. Higgins's acquaintances had escaped the confidence.

"Then I buried my love, my grief, and married Jane—poor Jane."

"Poor Jane!" echoed Mick innocently.

"I have bowed my head to my cross," the speaker breathed heavily through his nose. "Perhaps Jane is a little dense, not very intelligent, and far from beautiful, and I have looked upon the real thing, too late, but she manages the household well and her ten thousand pounds formed the nucleus of my fortune. We repine in our blindness at fate, my dear fellow, and all the time Providence is seeing ahead, and purposes to bring us consolation."

He was moved to further nose-blowing at his own beautiful eloquence.

"Ten thousand consolations!" muttered Mick to himself. "Poor human nature!"

"Muriel has been talking to me about *your*

financial successes. Most praiseworthy, my dear fellow, most praiseworthy! There 's nothing like marriage for sharpening one's wits; marriage makes or mars us."

Mick bowed a reverent head to this new truth.

Mr. Higgins, feeling he was giving the young author valuable copy, continued in the same vein. "And sobers, and makes decent citizens of us instead of wild bachelors leading, maybe, an irregular life." He looked away with a remorseful sigh.

Mick tried to think of the pompous Uncle William leading a wild or irregular life, but his imagination—vivid as it was—failed him. He waited, however, for the cream of the confidences. "You must of course," he agreed, "put aside profligacy."

"Yes indeed!" cried Mr. Higgins valiantly. Suddenly he preened himself, and his voice sank. "I know only too well what I am talking about," he owned with great reluctance. "I was a gay dog in my day—a gay dog! There are times," he added remorsefully, "when memory burns, and I can hardly look my trusting Jane in the face."

"What a loss for Jane!" Mick confided to his handkerchief.

"And the poor thing adores me. A sad dog, a sad dog!" he continued eagerly, "but—she was the prettiest girl I had ever seen, and the best of us are weak before beauty. . . ."

"She" had been his mother's little maid-of-all-work, and perhaps she had been comely enough—when her face was clean. William Higgins, as a

soft cub of eighteen, had kissed her more than once behind the kitchen door—washing his face afterwards to allay suspicion. That was the one hideous memory that made him feel deliciously black in his innocent wife's eyes. The other was equally foolish—and harmless—but they served to make him feel very much a sinful man of the world at times like these. Mr. Higgins loved to wallow in emotion—out of business hours. Inside them he was found rather a hard nut to crack, and certainly not given to sentimental consideration for the woes of others.

Mick's shrewd mind suspected much that was left unsaid. "Don't tell me of your past orgies," he begged. "You might make me envious—and I 've got to be respectable myself now."

"Ah, but you can rejoice with the lover of your youth!" said the poetical Mr. Higgins; "can live in an ideal country cottage beyond the strife of the world with the wife of your heart—a girl so handsome, so good, so charming, that all who see her must envy you! Marriage halves our sorrows and doubles our joys! Never forget that, old chap!" He patted Mick paternally on the shoulder—really he was getting *fond* of the fellow—and, not content with the gift of the cottage, bestowed upon him original brain matter. "But don't you go stealing all this for your books now!" he added shaking an arch finger at him.

The young man gave a relieved look at the incoming train, and helped his wife's uncle

into a first-class compartment with considerable alacrity.

The whistle blew.

"God bless you, my *dear* fellow," said the ex-mayor and future peer, emotionally.

"And *you*," returned Mick politely, shutting the door on him.

He tramped all the way back, thankful to be rid of Uncle William for a while. He might be amusing unconsciously, but one could have too much of a good thing. He did not want Mr. Higgins, he wanted the Elf.

"Where is she?" were his first words on return.

"If you mean Miss Elphenstonne she could n't stay to tea after all," returned Muriel stiffly, "and I must say her conduct has shocked me very much. And, oh Mick, what shall we do! Uncle William gave Mrs. Hobbs a sovereign—just fancy!—and she 's gone about a new bonnet and getting converted! And poor Aunt Susan is awfully upset about everything and very annoyed that you have n't put the brakes of her bicycle right. She says she could be killed a dozen times for all you 'd care. *Do* remember to-night!"

But Mick had gone—to seek Miss Elphenstonne.

CHAPTER XX

TEMPEST DRIVEN

DEMON voices shrieked through the night, and Mick sat up listening to them, exulting in them. All the demons that had their being in him —and they were legion—woke and rejoiced in the riot of the night. Here were strife and passion set free at last; here was license unchecked, uncontrolled!

Mick who had been sitting by the fire got up suddenly with a savage laugh, and went out into the tormented forest.

The wind rose higher and yet higher, and his spirit rose with it, it broke loose to travel on the wind that drove many a ship to a port their captains little recked of. Vagabondia in her wildest mood called to him and he listened with heart triumphant. Then a tree crashed suddenly close to him, and the sound of it brought him back to realities with a jerk.

What of Miss Elphenstonne in her tent? Would it hold? Was there one chance in a thousand of its holding? He knew too well the answer to that, and, getting his bicycle lamp from the cottage he

dashed to the tent—or to where the tent should have been standing. It was only a huddled heap now.

"Elf," he shouted in terror, and the wind drove his voice across the moors. "Where are you, Elf?"

The wind laughed mockingly in answer; that was all.

"Elf?" he shouted desperately again, feeling along the recumbent canvas.

"I thought you were never coming," spoke a smothered voice resentfully, "the beastly thing 's tied me up in bed, and I can't move! Thank goodness, I got the picture off yesterday."

"Well, you 're all right now!" he cried with hoarse relief, and set to work to disentangle the hapless artist. At last he had released her, his face white with thankfulness. He had feared a thousand disasters; even death.

"That 's all very well," she returned in a cross voice, "all right indeed! Everything is blown away or broken, neither stick nor stone left standing. The looking-glass is smashed to bits, and that is little short of a tragedy. How am I going to do my hair? And I have n't any home—in the middle of the night!"

She shivered under the blanket he was holding round her, and for a moment he thought she was going to cry; then she changed her mind and laughed instead.

"Of course it 's really a huge joke," she

said, "only one's sense of humour wakes up rather slowly in such circumstances!"

"I was afraid the wind had blown you back to the other elves," he replied, trying —not very successfully—to speak lightly.

"What a good thing it 's only you!" she said, clutching the blanket. "I have n't managed to get artistically saved at all, only my second best *robe de nuit*—and it might have been Uncle William—think of his disillusion! Oh dear! it 's cold." Her teeth began to chatter. "Can you put up the little tent again, do you think?"

"Impossible," he replied briefly. "I 'll fix you up to-morrow as well as ever if the storm 's over; in the meanwhile I shall carry you to the cottage."

"Carry me!" she bit her lips. "Don't be absurd, Mick, I can walk!"

"In bare feet! You won't happen to get the chance!" He made a sudden dart at her and held her fiercely against him. "I 've got you now!" he said, with hoarse triumph.

"Well, be quick!" She was glad he could not see her face, nor she his, for he had to hold the lantern to light the dark little path to the cottage. He appeared to have some difficulty in finding it.

"How slow you are!" she frowned.

"Elf . . . " he drew a long breath, pulled her head closer into the hollow of his neck, turned his lips to the sting of her lashing hair. "Elf . . . is n't this what you want too, just you and me to-

gether, and alone with the wild night, for ever, for always! Listen to the voices. You and I have been given ears to hear and understand all the unchained forces of nature. They call you too. You are their child as I am, Elf, and you know it! We've got to follow them—we 're *going* to follow them. They mean freedom, love, happiness, and fame for you if you wish it. I only want you, darling. You know what the sea will look like tonight, a road without earth's road-dust, your road, my road, *our* road! Let 's follow it, Elf, and take its fortunes, whatever they may be. We will be together; I will guard you as the dearest, most precious thing of all the earth. I will never fail you, Elf, never, so help me God. . . ." His voice broke.

But Miss Elphenstonne spoke, after a little moment of silence, calmly, coldly, most matter-of-fact: "Mick, the storm has made you mad—and I don't want pneumonia, Dr. Byrne said——"

"You 're in love with him?" he flung the accusation recklessly.

"I 'm not in love with anybody," her voice was vehement.

"Then he 's in love with you——"

"Nonsense! Do hurry, Mick!" and, for all the closeness of his hold, she shivered.

"Are n't you comfortable?" he growled, holding her yet closer.

"No—I am half suffocated!" she spoke breathlessly, struggling in his grasp. "Put me down Mick, put me down, do you hear!"

"Oh, here 's the cottage," he said gruffly.

"Put me in that big chair then." She had to speak twice before he most unwillingly obeyed.

He stood looking down at her as she sat wrapped in her blanket, one beautiful bare foot just showing, her hair almost covering her. How magnificent it was! How it had lashed his face in the storm, clung to his lips! He could feel it still. He turned for a moment and laid his face down on his arms. Let her go? He would never let her go!

She was horribly strong in her coldness and her pride, but he and love should prove stronger.

Then her teeth chattered, and he looked up to find the fire going out, and Miss Elphenstonne most deadly cold.

"I 'll get you something more comfortable than blankets," he said quietly, "and set the fire going again. You poor, wee, perished mite!"

He returned with his own dressing-gown and a pair of slippers. Muriel's would have been a good deal too large for the visitor, and his own were merely absurd, yet in her heart the girl was glad he had brought nothing belonging to the other woman. Then her eyes dilated suddenly. What made her think of Muriel as "the other woman"? She had never named her thus before?

She sat quite lost in her coverings, and watched Mick as he knelt down to coax the kitchen-fire into a blaze. How big and brown and strong he was; how sure of himself; how eager to brave fate! Mick remembered how once—it seemed a lifetime

ago now—he had lit the fire for another and seen the face of the Elf in the flames. She had smiled at him then out of the glow; now he knew he would never see anything else. His hand shook a little as he arranged the coals, and a very tense silence grew in the rich uncle's cottage.

Outside the wind shouted like a god in wrath: inside two hearts beat madly. The silence lengthened, grew unbearable, and desperately at last Miss Elphenstonne broke it.

"I—I think I had better go," she said breathless, something akin to panic in her voice.

The fire was alight now, blazing merrily: its flames showed Mick's face set and pale as he knelt closer to her, and trembling hands sought trembling hands. "Go where?" he asked, speaking with difficulty. "There is nowhere in the world you could go to escape from me, you know that, Elf, don't you?" His hand closed like a vise over hers.

She shrank back with a low moan. "Let me go! Upstairs, anywhere . . .!"

"To Muriel?" he asked grimly.

"No—oh, no. Oh, Mick, remember Muriel. . .!" She began to sob like a frightened child.

His arms closed round her, and he buried his face in the warm, dark hair. "I am never going to remember anybody but you, Elf," he said, in a stifled tone. "I am going back to the old wander wonder trail, and—you are coming with me."

"She shuddered in his arms. "No—no! This

is madness—worse! Oh, what 's happened to me, Mick, what 's happened to me?" She laid her cheek on his head with a terrified little whimper.

"Love—that 's all," he returned, "just love, Elf. It had to come some day, you know. Thank God it 's come for me!" his voice rose exultantly. "Nothing else matters."

"*Everything* else matters!" she cried despairingly. "Muriel, my work, my good name—right!"

"I have done with Muriel," he answered, between set teeth. "'A rag and a bone and a hank of hair,' that 's all *she* is. Her measure is too small to count—how small, only one who has lived with her, knows: she is nothing, has nothing, let her go! Let everything go!"

"Has Muriel done with you? She is your wife, nothing can alter that!"

"The law can and shall, she shall divorce me."

She shrank in horror. "That would be horrible—horrible! Unthinkable! I could not bear it! And Mick . . . have you done with honour?"

She tried to see into his wild, passionate eyes.

He would not look at her, but he stiffened suddenly. There were other arms thrusting him away from the woman he loved, other eyes—clear blue eyes—saying, "Thou shalt not." Had young Gore died for this?

He writhed as a man tormented, a man haunted beyond endurance, cursed with a doom more cruel than words; but he did not loosen his hold.

"What is honour?" he asked. "An empty word,

a shibboleth! The honour of one is the dishonour of another, every race has its own, every class its own standard, and all are far as the poles apart! For you and me the standard is different too: we are strong enough to make it what we will. Can I give honour to Muriel, the wife I never wanted? Can I bring dishonour to you, the woman I love beyond all other things on earth? Can there be dishonour in a love as strong as the grave? To love enough is to do away with the lesser things. If there were no you, I should still leave Muriel; that has been certain these many months past, and she will be glad, not sorry. Come with me, beloved, make what terms you will, I will observe them faithfully; my love is the best, the highest part of me——"

"Oh, Mick, don't. Have pity!" she cried, in a tortured voice.

"You doubt me—I can see it in your eyes." He kissed them fiercely. "You *fear* my love, think perhaps it 's just a passing, physical thing—and it 's so high, so pure, so holy, it scarce can seem a part of me! We will look with a clear faith in each other's eyes and what will the judgment of the world matter? Is n't it usually wrong? You shall be just my cherished friend, my fellow-vagabond, I will guard you as a sister—till the law can make you my wife! Oh, you little Philistine, is n't that enough? Let people say and think what they please, put the usual construction on our flight—we shall be above and beyond 'people,' you and I,

and blameless even in the eyes of the Philistines' God. Come, my princess," and he held out his arms towards her.

But Miss Elphenstonne beat at them fiercely with tiny relentless hands.

"Let me go," she cried wildly, "let me go!"

He only drew her hands against his lips. "All the rest shall go—but not just this one, small, priceless person!"

"It is . . . impossible."

"It is not only possible, but easy, the easiest thing in the world."

"Perhaps that," she answered bitterly, "since it is always easy to choose the wrong, and the greater the wrong the easier, I suppose," she ended with a shaky little laugh.

"I say there will be no wrong. Do you doubt me?" He made her look into his eyes, which were wild no longer, but burnt with a steady flame.

"I trust you absolutely," she covered her face with her hands for a moment, "but, oh, my dear, we would have to bear the blame just the same; to be innocent in my own heart would not help me much when the world flung its jibes at me!"

"The world! What world? Is there a world in the heart of the desert?"

"My poor Mick, there is always a world for evil-doers. Judgment from our fellow-men would await us at the Pole, and follow us throughout our lives, and perhaps . . . the lives of others. A man may have performed a thousand noble, a

thousand heroic actions, and have made but one tiny slip, but it is that slip that is always recalled, always remembered, in connection with his name. You can find anything more easily than you can find Charity: perhaps the world cannot afford it. It certainly never gives the benefit of the doubt; we should be branded for always."

"Branded by the verdict of fools, of cabbages, of sickly, bloodless slaves!" he burst out. "How could their verdict touch you?"

"It would drag me down," she said hopelessly.

"In a year or so people would forget we had gone through the divorce court; there is little time for long memory in these strenuous days. O, Elf, just you and me . . . and some day our children! I will learn to carry a Fat-Legs, when he 's yours."

"Oh, don't !" she cried, with a great sob. "It can never be, never, never!"

"It shall be," he answered confidently. "Dear comrade, some day dear wife," and he turned to kiss her quivering lips.

She clung to him for a moment, then her arms fell away, and she pushed him from her side, "Mick, I will tell you the truth. I have not told you all the truth—why it can never be . . ." her voice was hoarse and broken.

"*Elf!*"

"It is true that I care," she said with difficulty. "But not enough, dear, not enough! A great love would do what you ask; mine is not great enough."

"Not great enough," he echoed, and rose to his feet, his face very dazed and blank. "What are you saying, Elf? You do not mean it, darling!"

"I mean it," she said more firmly. "Oh, I care enough to marry you honourably if I could—people need scarcely care at all for that," she added bitterly, "but not enough for great sacrifices, not enough for—the other. I cannot pass the test. There are things dearer to me than you, my ambition, my pride, my good name. I cannot put them aside. I cannot, I cannot! Perhaps you think it 's just a question of . . . of morality. It is n't. It 's only a question of . . . vanity. I have held my head so very high, so much higher than other women, and they have stood aside for me as if it were my right. Perhaps in my hateful egoism I thought it was. So, though unworthy, I have yet sat on a throne, been envied, courted, admired—and hated. And now you ask me to step down, to put myself under their feet, to fling myself on the mercy of jealous women. Jealousy knows not mercy. 'How are the mighty fallen!' is their song of victory, their battle cry! I cannot do it, Mick. I . . . am not great enough."

There was a long silence. Miss Elphenstonne dropped her shamed face in her hands, sitting very still, looking very small. The light flickered on her hair, dwelling lovingly on the red gleams of it. At moments she was bathed in flame.

"I see . . ." said Mick at length, with dry lips. "I see. . . ."

The crashing of fallen trees was like the crashing of his own world which lay in ruins.

Yet there must be, should be, some other way. He would build another world, create a new heaven and a new earth.

"The smallness . . ." went on Miss Elphenstonne, in the smallest of voices, "is . . . not only physical." Her laugh jarred. "I am little, little, all through. Even for love, I cannot rise to the sublime heights of self-sacrifice. I still cling to my gods. Only my art is great, only for that would I be dragged through the mire, endure the world's scorn. I am not worthy of any man's heart and soul—least of all, am I worthy of yours. It is better to be great and evil, than little and 'good.' Try and understand. The whispering tongues, the covert glances would kill me, I should die of them. It would not even be shame, if I cared enough there would be no shame; but I do not, and my art, my vanity, is more to me than you. I am little, but my love is smaller still, too small for you."

He stooped and kissed her trembling hands, looking down at her very pitifully, feeling the shamed, piteous eyes like the wound of a knife.

"Yes, my dear," he said heavily. "It is too small and weak a love, too easily killed. . . ."

"And I should hate to injure your wife, you believe that, don't you?" She spoke in a choked voice.

"Of course I believe it. But, dear, it could make no difference to Muriel; I am going anyway. I 've

planned it all a hundred times. It is not impossible to seem dead, it is not impossible to let there be proofs. She thinks I am going abroad for a little while, but she will only be glad when I never return. She will have money enough, be a 'widow' with an income. It will be the time of her life." He kicked viciously at the sinking fire. "And she can make a more congenial marriage without anyone being a penny the worse, since the 'dead' will never return to England. I shall start afresh, a new name, a new world! Elf, if she marries, will you come to me then?"

"You will still be her husband," she answered inexorably.

His mouth twisted. "Fancy the respectable conventional Muriel with two husbands!" he exclaimed, bursting into a sudden harsh laugh. "Aunt Susan would not think it quite 'nice,' I 'm sure."

"I cannot face it, it must be good-bye now. You were right when you said I was just foam of the sea, as light, as useless: so—good-bye."

He took no notice of the timid outstretched hand, and she withdrew it with a hot blush, her eyes filling. "When are you going?" she ventured.

"My plans will be complete in about a week."

She cowered lower in the big chair. "And till then—shall I see you again?" she enquired, in a forlorn voice.

"Only under *my* conditions, not yours," he answered, in a hard voice. "Yet we shall meet,

for you will find your love stronger, braver than you think, and will come and tell me so!"

She shook her head.

"You shall bring me, send me—whichever you please—a lock of your hair, Elf; I shall understand then."

"It will never be cut for that purpose," she answered finally. "So—it 's got to be good-bye now, Mick." Her lips went suddenly dry. How strong, how terrible was this love that had come upon her like a thief in the night and yet—thank God—there were things stronger!

"Yes, it 's good-bye," he said quietly, and for a moment their lips clung desperately together. "Good-bye, and all the best of life for you, ever, always, my darling!"

"Oh, Mick—good-bye!" Her eyes were piteous but still irrevocable in their determination.

He held her for a space longer, burying his haggard face in her splendid hair. "There 's such a lot of it," he said with an attempt at a laugh, "that I 'm sure you 'll spare a little lock for me in the end, Elfkin. You were never a greedy Elf."

"But I am greedy now," she answered, slipping out of his arms, "greedy for fame and honour and good repute."

"Yet the fate of empires have been changed in a week," he answered, throwing back his head; then he went out into the night, and Miss Elphenstonne sat and shivered and shuddered and wept by a dying fire.

CHAPTER XXI

THAT THING CALLED CHANCE

"There 's no such thing as chance;
And what to us seems merest accident,
Springs from the deepest source of destiny."

ON the following day Mick spoke to Muriel about his plans. "I 'm going abroad next week," he said abruptly.

"I never thought you meant as soon as that," she exclaimed, astonished. "Why have you made up your mind so suddenly?"

"Circumstances have changed. It will be advisable to go as soon as possible." He did not look at her.

"But *what* circumstances?" demanded the bewildered wife. "Oh, Mick, you have n't gone and lost that money?" She turned very pale.

"I have not; quite the contrary. I promised you five hundred a year to do as you pleased with. Well, it 's there, thanks to one thing and another, and certain mining magnates who put me in on the ground floor. It is settled on you, I shall never claim a penny, and if anything should happen to me——"

She shivered. "Don't be dreadful, Mick!" she implored. "What *should* happen to you? Nothing did before, and during those ten years you were in all sorts of places, all sorts of dangers. But you are a married man now, and must be careful. Besides, I don't understand at all. What will you gain by going abroad?"

"Fresh experiences, for one thing."

"Do you mean for your books? That the waste of time and money will pay you in the end, I mean?"

"Experiences always pay one——"

"As an author, I see. Still, it seems a pity. You could make money in England, and we 've got plenty to start on——"

"That reminds me, you can leave here whenever you like, and choose a house and furniture. Miss Dalton will help you. Do not consider me in any way. All places will be the same, as far as I am concerned."

"Will you be away long?" She was puzzled, and regretful that she could not feel unhappier at the prospect. But Mick was such a jarring element, his absence could only mean peace.

He pushed back a blazing coal with his foot. "That depends on many things; I will write."

"Are you going to work when you are away, or just . . . wander?" she asked, with sudden suspicion. "You must not let a dreadful habit like that get hold of you *now*." Her mouth shut ominously.

"Oh, I daresay I shall work," he said, carelessly. "I shall need the money—another novel, a volume of amusing travels perhaps."

Her face cleared. That would, she knew, mean more money. When he returned to add his income to hers they would be much better off, and all the time he would be writing more works, adding more sums to invested capital. He might even end by being rich—for an author. Uncle William had the very highest opinion of his abilities—and undoubtedly there would some day be Uncle William's money, if Mick continued to blind that gentleman as to his real character. If there had been a child, or the prospect of a child, she would have been a very happy, triumphant woman in that moment. He would be famous, make of her a personage, but there would still be the great lack.

She put her hand on his arm. "I am sorry you will have to be away so long, dear," she said, gently. "Take care of yourself, Mick. Perhaps we shall come to understand each other better on your return—and I will have the house really nice for you. You shall be proud of it!"

He moved to attend to the fire and her hand fell away. His face had flushed slightly. His intention remained uuchanged, but he did not like to remind himself he was about to desert the woman he had sworn to cherish all his life. He had planned a year of hard work at his profession. It would be necessary for him to make what money

he could and transfer it to his new identity before he . . . died, if he was one day to become responsible for the welfare of the Elf, and he preferred to believe it would yet come to that. If he desired to continue his craft, his way would be all over again to make, and publishers who had weclomed Talbot, might turn up their noses at, say, Brown, till they were convinced that Brown, though a newcomer, had a gift that might prove remunerative. And that would take time. As he looked gloomily into the fire, he wondered how his ingenuity was going to manage his own death and proof of his death. A dead vagrant buried in his name and clothes . . . the bearded Brown witness of his death, entrusted with the sending home of papers of identification? Would it be possible? Easy or difficult he was determined to accomplish the result by some means or other. The impossible should become the possible—the credible.

When he was Brown, had a beard and moustache, would his old friends be puzzled by the resemblance to the dead man they had known? It need go no further than a chance resemblance. It was so easy to obliterate oneself; he would not be the first man nor the last, who found it convenient to "die" to his people and his home.

Muriel would marry again and in the end he would win the Elf! He stretched out his arms and heaved a long deep sigh. Freedom called from over the sea, and soon the trammels of civilisation would have fallen from him.

Muriel had come down to find no trace of Miss Elphenstonne, who, soon after it was light, had returned to her tent—to find it standing firm again. Mick had seen to that as soon as the wind died down, and her eyes filled with tears at this sign of his thoughtfulness.

During that last week Mick was frequently at Southampton making his arrangements, and two days were spent in London. Of Miss Elphenstonne he saw nothing, and soon he must pass out of her life. She never believed he would keep his word, and go without a last farewell. That would be cruel, and Mick was never cruel, and least of all to her.

What leisure Mick had was given to the final correction of the *Book of the Elf*, with which he came near to being satisfied. Yet there was bitterness in it too. Its writing had meant the happiest hours of his life in close companionship with the woman he loved, and was leaving, for many a long day, if not for ever.

"If anything happened to Muriel . . ." He thrust aside the horrible thought. Not by *that* path—heaven, love itself, forbade! Yet for the other her pride was too fierce, her love too frail.

Muriel wondered that he found no time to visit his friend, but it never occurred to her that they had quarrelled; she merely decided that the friendship was not as strong as she had supposed, and that Mick was "queer" even in the matter of friendship.

"Before you go, there are two things I specially want you to do for me," she said. "Put Aunt Susan's bicycle right, and write to Uncle William."

"My dear girl, I have n't a minute ; there is no time."

"You could find time if you really wished," she returned.

"Oh, very well . . . what 's the old buffer's address? What am I to say?"

"Oh, just a nice, friendly letter to say good-bye."

Mick scrawled a hasty line to that effect, and then, making the excuse of posting it in time for the collection, went for a long ramble in the woods.

It was October, and the forest was flaming in purple and gold, but its beauty did not soothe his tempestuous spirit. Barely a year since he had come! It was incredible—it seemed a lifetime! In a few days at the latest he would be on an outward-bound steamer, the wind singing in his ears as it never sang on shore. Half of him would thrill exultantly to the sound of it, but the other half of his being would be desolate for want of the Elf to share the joy. Yet he would sooner expect to find trees "like men walking" than the Elf to lower her deadly pride. From Bramble Hill he gazed on a sight to delight the most jaded, but it found no favour in his sight, the glory blazed in vain for him, and he came slowly back towards the cottage by way of the moors.

He made a long detour, returning by the Salisbury road, and his keen eyes distinguished the

home he was leaving before it would have been visible to most. As he looked towards it he was thankful to remember that his part in it was almost done. He screwed up his eyes, shaded them with his hand, for he thought he saw someone come out of the cottage. It seemed to him that the figure, whoever it was, was wheeling out a bicycle, preparatory to mounting, and a flash of annoyance seized him as he decided that it was Muriel coming to look for him. He was in no mood for Muriel. He quickened his pace, and going along with great, swinging strides, got a distant view of the steep hill leading from the cottage, and saw one tiny speck. Then something —he had an idea it must be Esmerelda—got in the way of the cyclist who dashed down the hill at a terrific pace straight for the wall and the heap of stones that lay beyond the turn of the wood and Mick's vision.

He uttered an exclamation, and began to run towards the scene of what he felt could only be serious disaster. Would she pass in safety? And even as he ran, he grew suddenly afraid, clammily cold. There was a sense as of tragedy in the air; of something worse than tragedy, for he knew Muriel had met with her death, and that . . . he was *glad!* He hated himself, strove to push the unspeakable thing from him, but a voice ringing in his ears drowned all other voices. "The way is clear!" it whispered. "The way is clear! You need not go back alone now!"

And yet, and yet . . .! Muriel had managed

that hill a thousand times. It was not like her to lose her head; why had she not applied the brake at once? *The brake!* He caught his breath, Muriel had lent her own bicycle to Miss Dalton, who was going into Southampton, and herself, as the better rider, had taken the one with the jammed brakes. She had been a fearless rider from a child, unusually skilful, a brakeless bicycle held no terrors for her, and neither need it have done so—if it had not been for Esmerelda.

He put his hand over his eyes and shuddered. A dog, a horse, a man! Now a woman's death lay at his door—for something told him she was dead.

That ancient vagabond, and his evil tale of foolish, idle superstition! Was it no idle superstition after all? Were such curses laid on mankind? Yet, the dog had been infinitely more to him than Muriel. He tried to think of the horror of the accident, to crush down the struggling relief, but all the time the voice sang on, "The way is clear at last! You can take her in all honour!" Oh, if man might be stronger than his vilest self! Muriel, killed in an accident indirectly of his doing! Muriel, motionless at the bottom of the hill, never to rise again! Muriel, so keen to grasp what she held of the sweets of life!

The orderly Muriel with her head lying in the dust—it seemed almost an indecency!

If only he had remembered the brake, been conscience-clear!

Because Muriel had asked him, he had forgotten

easily, but if it had been for the Elf, there would have been no need to remind him! He did not like to think of that now.

Any time—no time—was good enough for the woman he had married—and killed. If only he had known it was to prove her last request! He could not go and see what lay against that great heap of stone; there were people running—a great confusion. . . .

He sat down and covered his face with his hands. They would see him, come and tell him; he was too great a coward to face his own work. And yet? Suppose she was not dead, just maimed? He could not leave her then; he could never leave her! The sweat ran down into his eyes. How long they were in coming, the people who hid that huddled thing from him, but they were coming now, and by the rich uncle's cottage he sat and waited . . .

His head fell forward; how was he to face the accusation in the dead eyes! She would know . . now. And if she was not dead!

He heard them bringing her up the hill, recognised Harrison's slow, heavy tramp, and he pressed his eyes fiercely into the palms of his hands. He would not look upon that sight, lest in after years it came between him and the Elf, and he would have to remember through what means he had come to his desire.

A bloody road to happiness, a red river to freedom!—and yet he would unhesitatingly walk

therein, as he would have gone to her through fire and flood. It was the inevitable, irrevocable thing.

The tramp of the marching feet was very close now—dumb men walking heavily as in a dream. Yet for all their dumbness they were calling something, calling him by his name—"Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!" How loud it sounded in that deathly silence!

A woman's skirt swished over the grass towards him—a stranger's he stupidly supposed, for he always knew when the Elf was coming, and this was a sound that left him cold.

Then a voice, shrill and tearful, pierced into his brain.

"O Mick! . . . and I asked you *three* times about the brake! Mrs. Hobbs was alone downstairs, and did n't know . . . she borrowed it to meet you, and—Esmerelda, poor dear, got in the way! I saw it all from upstairs, but it was too late. . . . If only you had done what I asked, for *once!* But you have killed her! She is . . . literally . . . broken to pieces . . .!" The voice fled sobbing.

And it was the Elf's dead body they carried past.

Mick fell forward on his face, and in that moment there died for ever all higher ideals, all possibilities of greatness, of peace, of happiness. For once the little "great Miss Elphenstonne" passed on her way, and the man who loved her lifted no head in greeting. The light that had rejoiced to

play upon her hair came out of the West to smile down upon it now, to turn it red as the flames had reddened it that night of the storm—but it was a red that dripped slowly . . . It lay upon her clothes too, but most mercifully had spared her face, where death sat strangely, incongruously, almost mockingly. The eyebrows were slightly raised as if in surprise, only a dark gleam showed through the thickly-fringed lids, and the lips were very cold and proud and scornful. One gem-decked hand hung down, its fingers clenched upon some object jealously guarded even in death!—though the arm was broken. And so, ungreeted of her lover, ungreeting, she passed on her way.

CHAPTER XXII

"ET PUIS, BON SOIR!"

"So my proud soul, so you whose shining force
Had galloped with me to eternity,
Stand now, appealing like a tired horse,
Unharness me!"

FRANCES CORNFORD.

MICK got up and found himself walking forward, where or why, he neither knew nor cared. He merely followed some blind impulse. He did not know that it was very late, when, his face very grey and old, he groped his way mechanically into the cottage.

If there were light and warmth inside he was unconscious of it; even Esmerelda, smeared with ill-got gains, did not make him laugh. He only stared round, looking very stupid, and the two women who had been threshing out the subject of the tragedy for hours, looked at each other meaningly. They had expected him to be upset, were going to be kind, but he only seemed indifferent.

"At last!" cried Muriel, bustling forward, and speaking nervously. "I thought you were lost!

You must be very tired and hungry. . . . I 'm so sorry, but Mrs. Hobbs found your whisky and Esmerelda ate your supper when we left it before the fire to keep hot. . . ."

"It does not matter," he said quietly, coming in and shutting the door—"it does not matter in the least, Muriel, thank you," and he sat down in the chair the Elf had crouched in the night of the storm, and nodded a greeting to the gay face smiling elfinly out of the flames.

Again the two women looked at each other. Did he, or did he not, care? He looked quite contented, quite happy; he was even smiling.

Miss Dalton cleared her throat. "I wired to Lord Elphenstonne," she announced. "I thought it only right under the circumstances. This is his reply." She spread a telegram before Mick, who read mechanically: "*Am grieved at sad tragedy to niece. Regret owing chill cannot be present at funeral and son is abroad; if necessary will send agent as representative. Wire reply.*"

"We did n't see why the agent should come," said Miss Dalton, scornfully, "and, as you were n't to be found, we wired a negative. I suppose, however, Lord Elphenstonne will be responsible for all expenses in connection with the funeral?"

"What funeral?" asked Mick, staring.

"Of course there will have to be a funeral," said Muriel, a little impatiently. That Mick should go wool-gathering at such a time as this! And the friend he had professed to think so much of lying

dead! His heartlessness was awful; it shocked her to the utmost depths of her being.

"I also wired to Uncle William," she said. "I thought he had better know. He would be sure to see it in the papers." She crushed down a conviction that, after all, it might be for the best. Uncle William had showed himself to be made of very human clay where the artist was concerned. It was not nice to think of him bereft of dignity; now he could regain it, return to his pedestal.

Miss Dalton, too, had thoughts she did not utter. It scarcely seemed seemly that a lady should be killed in such a fashion, just like a common person through a bicycle and a pig! If she had been really "nice," that sort of thing would n't have happened. Yet of course it was all for the best since Heaven had decreed it. After all, the artist had no husband to mourn her loss, and seemed very much alone in the world; she would not make the blank a young wife like Muriel would have made. That would have been sad indeed—too terrible!

Mrs. Hobbs, lachrymose with whisky, came from the tent where she had helped to perform the last offices for the dead, and wept when Mick alluded to the tragedy.

"Did Miss Elphenstonne leave any message for me when she called?" he demanded unemotionally.

Mrs. Hobbs was shocked at his callousness. "It 's out of sight, out of mind, with the likes o' them!" she said to herself. "Ho yus!"

"She left no message," she said severely, on the question being repeated. "She wanted to see you very special that was all, and said she 'd borrow the bicycle and have a look for you 'erself—I never knewed anythink was wrong with the ole bike. I hope the Lord will 'ave mercy on her soul,' I 'm sure," she added, with a sob, "but I don't see 'ow he can. It would n't be fair to them as has lived decent." She was no optimist on the matter of the eternal welfare of Miss Elphenstonne.

"I 'll tell her that," said Mick, standing up. "It will amuse her."

"Eh?" said Mrs. Hobbs, staring, dazed.

"I always tell her things; we laugh over them together," said Mick, his eyes very bright.

"Young feller, you 're drunk!" said the shocked Mrs. Hobbs. "An' at sich a time! Well journalists always did tike the kike and alwiys will, that 's certain!"

Mick laughed, and passed out of the cottage, and the three women stared after him in dumbfounded terror. To laugh at such a time!

Mick wandered foolishly in the forest, his mind in confusion. There was something he was trying to remember—but could not remember. When it grew light he made his way to the tent, and paused inside the larger room, listening intently, waiting for her voice to sound from the inner one. The *Book of the Elf* lay ready for the publisher on a table, and he picked it up and put it in his pocket. Of course that was what he had come for.

Then all of a sudden he remembered, and staggered forward to look his last upon the small dark face. It lay shadowed in her hair—alive in spite of death.

The lips, no longer cold and proud, smiled tenderly, humorously. A secret gleamed whimsically between the fringed lids—she had not been wont to keep secrets from him. It hurt unbearably that she should do so now.

If the face seemed alive neither was there death in the hair; the wind still thrilled in it, and it was warm and clinging to the touch. He looked down at his hands and remembered; they were full of leaves. He had promised her a laurel crown, and he wound it round the small head, while she seemed to smile elfishly up at him. Maybe she understood, maybe she, too, enjoyed the jest—and at least it was a crown well won!

Then last of all, he took out his book—their book. In parts it was very great, very wonderful—but only because she had made it so. It represented all he might ever know of high endeavour, of that thing called fame.

He tried to place it between the tiny fingers. She had cared so very much for it, but now it seemed she cared no longer, her fingers were so very indifferent. They did not value his last gift, his life-work. There was something they valued infinitely more, something they guarded with fierce clenched pride.

What was she taking with her to the grave?

What did she hold so precious that she kept it secret even in death? Was it—the keepsake of another man? He thought of Byrne; he, too, had loved her, and as he thought of his rival, the flap of the tent was lifted, and the doctor, haggard and stooping, stood before him.

The eyes of the two men met, and undying hatred leapt into being between them. In the face of primitive death they flung aside convention.

"Go!" said Mick. "You have no right here."

But the brown doctor faced him steadily, the flame had gone from his eyes, and his face was infinitely sad. "I have the right . . . of one who loved her," he said.

"You fool! Many have loved her, been of no account to her, but none loved her as I, or won her as I won her. . . ."

"I at least would never have loved her to her hurt," said the elder man very bitterly, passing from the tent.

Then Mick, his face flooded with darkness, turned to that other, and strove to see what she guarded so long and well.

Mercilessly he bent back the stiff, insistent fingers, and took from her the thing she cherished. "I 'll give it back, Elf, I 'll give it back!" he said huskily. "Only . . . I 've *got* to know."

Then he opened the small sealed packet, read his own name upon it, looked down upon a tress of thick, dark hair.

So . . . she had given her pride at the last!

He placed the dead woman's gift in his breast, and sank forward with his head against the knees the stones had broken so ruthlessly.

Too late! Too late! Too late! And with a great and exceeding bitter cry, he sank senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER XXIII

"DIE WANDERLUST"

"A wet road, heaving, shining,
And wild with seagulls' cries,
A mad salt sea-wind blowing,
The salt spray in my eyes.
My road calls me, lures me,
West, east, south, and north;
Most roads lead men homewards,
My road leads me forth. . . ."

Roadways—JOHN MASEFIELD.

"I SUPPOSE Lord Elphenstonne has come? Has the Comtesse de Malmèdy sent any representative?" were the first words of Mr. Higgins, as he grasped Mick's hand, and blew his nose.

"No."

"But my *dear* fellow, who is to be chief mourner? Of course I shall only be too proud, and God knows there is every reason why I have a right. . . ." He got out his handkerchief again.

"There will be just you and me and the doctor," said Mick, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Mr. Higgins was genuinely upset, yet he could not but feel that had he been permitted to mingle

his tears with the tears of Lord Elphenstonne, and support the grief-stricken form of the Comtesse de Malmèdy (who happened to be in Russia), he could have done himself, and the dead girl, more justice.

"In the midst of life we are in death!" he said suddenly.

Mick, his smile very cynical, nodded in agreement. "I think they—the clergymen—read the service," he said. "Shall we start for the—the tent?"

For Mick was insistent that the funeral *cortège* should start from the tent, to the further dismay of Miss Dalton. Really, a funeral from a tent was scarcely reverent, scarcely respectable! And Mick might show a little more grief! There was William already quite overcome—the great-hearted, great man!

"What a dreadful day it is to be sure!" lamented Mr. Higgins. "Fortunately I brought an extra coat, and an umbrella, and have on a thick Jaeger vest."

For there were wind and storm for Miss Elphenstonne's burial day, as, with the wreath of fame round the proud, dead brow, the *Book of the Elf* between the tiny, chill fingers, and the key of a man's life and soul in her keeping, she passed to the grave she had feared so unreasonably.

They had disturbed no poppies to dig that grave; their gay little life was over, dead before maturity, and yet as he stood there in the rain and the storm, Mick knew that never a wind would blow but he

would see their scarlet petticoats dancing unheedingly on the Elf's grave, and remember they were holding revelry over a broken body, broken life, and high ambition unfulfilled.

"Be sure not to catch cold," returned Mick. "I think . . . everybody is ready."

The little *cortège* started, walking slowly through the glory of the October forest.

They came to the spot where when Muriel and he had passed for the first time, he had heard the rain falling on a coffin. He heard it again now. That thing, too, had come to pass. Then there had been nothing tangible; only a swift vision; now he helped to bear a coffin up the steep little steps. Yet the vision had been the more real of the two. Nothing was in the least real now: he drifted from dream to dream. . . .

Life seemed determined to make him suffer, to grind him very small, but you cannot make the dead suffer, and he chuckled to think how he had got the best of life after all. Mr. Higgins was weeping in a rather disgusting, noisy fashion, wallowing in his grief. He was as ridiculous—as unconsciously humorous—as ever. Nobody would have enjoyed his attitude more than the Elf herself.

Why should Mr. Higgins be permitted to feel and not he? It was horrible that he could not grieve for the Elf; that the boon of suffering was not to be his; that he should become atrophied at such a moment.

The service proceeded, and Mr. Higgins fulfilled the function of chief mourner valiantly—though fortunately he remembered to keep dry, as far as the rain was concerned. His emotion was quite genuine. He could not see pain, but pathos at once appealed, and all the way back to the station he cried into his hat.

"I shall never get over this," he said miserably, to Mick. "*Never!*"

"No?"

"Never! The love of my youth was terrible enough, but the love of my maturity . . . it is infinitely worse! I have loved but two women, Mick, and both of them sleep the last, long sleep." His voice rose to a sound of grief little inferior to a bellow. "I have loved and lost—twice!"

"Indeed," said Mick.

"Yes, ah, I know you understand; yet you, my dear fellow, losing but a friend, happy with the wife of your heart . . . even you can hardly measure my grief. It may have been a sin for me, a married man, to love another woman than my wife, even if I had the strength to part from that woman in honour, but now Heaven has chastened me for that sin!"

"Rather!" said Mick. "Here 's the train, and —that little boy you had trouble with seems returning to school by it."

"Tell the guard! He must lock me in!" panted Mr. Higgins, in alarm.

But the guard had no time to lock the august

passenger in, and the bad little boy dived gaily into the carriage.

"What *O*, old chap," he said, in friendly fashion. "This is a bit of all right, ain't it!"

Mick wondered what would happen to the great Uncle William at the hands of the little boy, and decided he must go and tell Miss Elphenstonne about it. How amused she would be! How she would laugh!

Then he remembered he would never be able to make her laugh again. She lay where there is an end of laughter, and where dancing feet fall still. She would dance on the leaves no more, nor laugh for the gayest jest on earth.

And as he staggered back to where they had laid her, to be at last alone with his dead, the agony of realisation came over him. . . .

When night came, he was still standing dazed by an open grave, and as he stood, he lifted his head sharply, like a man awakening from a dream, for a voice was calling.

"Come back!" it thrilled softly. "Come back!"

And he knew that he would go. Empty of heart, barren of soul, there was still that left!

The desire of strange, fair cities shook him; and he bowed his knee to the vagabond's unsleeping god.

"*Die Wanderlust! Die Wanderlust!*"

It was stronger than life or love, greater than fame. It lived on while the graves clung together like hiving bees, and the grass was dead beneath the grey scattered ashes of Time.

It was stronger even than death, for beyond death it lived on, and after he had fallen in the wilderness, behold! the four winds of heaven played their game of riot with his dust, and carried it to other cities still! A vagabond in life; a vagabond in death. Desire held for an hour, and love had its brief magic day, while fame was but a mockery, as frail as a butterfly's wing, as evanescent as the foam of a reckless sea.

But the oldest thing of all was left.

So, as the dawn rose slowly, and splendour broke in the sky, he set his face toward the East.

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